

The Lady with the Sting

Alobwed'Epie



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Chapter One

Ntube had been in the Mission for four years. For the four years, her exemplary character had endeared her to everybody. It had cemented the relationship between her godmother's family and teacher George's. After Mass on Sundays, her mother Emade, had felt proud as Ntube came cuddling around her, and people calling her *etolemuan* (spoilt child). The events that had led Emade to seek refuge for her in the Mission had blurred with time. She had even lost interest in seeing Eduke struck with palsy.

She could now tolerate Ntube visit Atieg and even mingle with her friends in the village. One Sunday after Mass, Emade became so elated with the praises people lavished on Ntube's beauty and character that she started frothing again like fresh palm wine.

"Nobody can blow out God's candle," she said to herself. "The daughter-of-the-upstream-python is the pearl of the Mbuogmut clan, and whether people like it or not, she stands out distinctively."

Praises for Ntube were quite challenging. To ascertain that they were genuine, Emade made a deliberate scrutiny of her daughter's features. To her surprise, she discovered that for four years, Ntube had shot out like a reed in the early rains of the year. Ntube's accelerated growth made her look twice her age. At sixteen, her bosom was reaching the pinnacle of perfection. Her tough pre-puberty muscles were giving way to subtle feminine ones. Her buttocks were reaching the zenith of youthful development. They were not floppy. They did not sag. They did not wobble. They did not vibrate in movement. They simply reached the perfect shape of puberty – an aggressively provocative one.

These revelations made Emade develop 'chickens in her heart' at once. The old fears came back in full force and she thought that in reality, it was the Mission and not her neighbourhood that was dangerous to Ntube. She was split between two opposing views. She had no cause for alarm. Teacher George and his wife Sophie were very careful people. Sophie never allowed Ntube go to the market or to the stream alone. The two were always together. Yet the fear that a split second misstep could lead to ruin, slashed Emade's heart. She started thinking of withdrawing Ntube from the Mission and from school and getting her ready for marriage.

One Good Friday morning after Mass, Emade invited Sophie and Ntube to Atieg on Saturday. Although Sophie accepted the invitation, Emade was shocked that Sophie let Ntube brave the road alone on Saturday.

"Where is your Mistress?" Emade asked in anger.

"She has gone to see her mother at Meket. She could not come," Ntube responded.

"Has war broken out at Meket? Why couldn't she postpone your coming here then? She thinks she can make you travel alone from the Mission to here? With whom will you return? When she returns from Meket, tell her, 'a person who has once stubbed the ill-omen foot raises her toes even in sand'. I am not at all happy that she let you come here alone," Emade said.

"I took the road of the hammock. I don't know why you are always afraid. My friends return from school alone. Nothing happens to them," Ntube remarked.

"What are you saying? Whether they return from school safely or not, I don't want a repeat of your coming here alone. Where your friends go scot free, you get entangled. Nobody likes seeing locus twice. A spear never misses an orphan's pig. I don't want to be spread out again, like corn on a drying pad. If flies are to sore the ears of a little dog, the little dog itself should not assist them in doing so," Emade said emphatically.

Chapter Two

In spite of her tremendous rage, Emade cuddled the daughter-of-the-upstream-python with all the motherly love she could muster. Ntube returned the cuddling by playing the big baby. She wanted everything – sugar canes, pineapples, oranges, dried tadpoles, crabs and so on. Anything she wanted, Emade looked for. After getting the things and arranging them in a basket, she offered her specially prepared *esubag*, *nzabengen ne alem* (foofoo, spiced-saltless soup, and cocoyam-leaf-cake interlaced with porcupine meat).

“Mother, eat quickly. Let me see you off. I want to grind some beans for Ahone. Perhaps I shall see somebody going to Ekenzu tomorrow. If I do, I shall send it to her. So, eat and let me escort you to the big field,” Emade said.

“It is still early. I can help you with the cooking and when the pot is boiling, I shall return,” Ntube said.

“Eat, let’s go! If it is early for you, it is not for me,” Emade growled.

“Let’s go nooow,” Ntube said rather angrily after a few helpings.

Emade saw with great admiration Ntube lift a big bunch of plantain onto her head as if it were a bag of cotton.

“Mother, be careful. That plantain will break your neck. The Mission is far from here. If it is too heavy, we can cut it into two. You carry what you can and I will bring the other half tomorrow Sunday,” Emade advised.

“I shall carry it. Give me the basket also,” Ntube requested.

"Let me help you with the basket to the big field. You will be near the Mission then," Emade said, and got the basket.

Mother and daughter then set off. When they crossed the hammock, Ntube told Emade to go back. Seeing with what ease she carried the plantain, Emade decided to return. She shrieked Ntube farewell, and Ntube shrieked back.

Ntube did not make a hundred yards from where she parted with her mother when Kome-Ekeme, a tall bumpy-faced bully emerged from a grove like a cockroach from under a wooden box.

"Let me help you with your plantain," he suggested.

"For what? Have I told you that I am tired?" Ntube retorted angrily.

"I just want to help you. I love you. I saw you when you were going to see your mother and decided to wait for you," Kome said.

"Wait for me for what? Do you know you disturbed me last time? If you play, I shall tell the Headmaster," Ntube warned.

"If you tell him I shall say I did it. They will believe me," Kome threatened.

"You will say you did what?" Ntube asked with steaming anger.

"The thing," Kome responded.

Ntube turned red. A cruel sensation slashed through her heart. She peered at the speaker and spat.

Kome soon found out that while talking and walking they were gradually getting close to the main road. So he decided to take action. He seized the basket from the girl's hand and dashed into the bush with it.

"Come and take your basket," Kome invited.

"Bring that basket here, you beef," Ntube insulted.

"Come for it if you are a tough girl," Kome provoked.

Ntube darted vicious glances at him. There was a pause pregnant with machinations.

“Bring that Basket here. Do you think I am afraid of you?” Ntube threatened, threw down the plantain and charged at Kome.

“Take your basket,” Kome said with a more reconciliatory tone.

Ntube stretched her hand, took the basket and moved backwards to create a safe distance before turning to move away. When she got to the road she carried her plantain and started moving away. Kome saw the distance being created. He dashed at the girl again and held her. Ntube freed her right hand from his grip and with all her might hit him so hard that the bully went on his knees growling, howling and whining in pain like a cudgelled dog. Before he regained full consciousness, Ntube was at the main road panting and sweating from exhaustion. She got a stone and girding herself for the fight, waited for her attacker. Kome came in full furry but before they had a go at each other, Mr. Caius Nsahbinla who had gone to Nkinchong appeared on the scene. Ntube took refuge behind him.

“Boy, what is wrong?” he asked Kome.

“He is beating me,” Ntube interrupted.

“Why are you beating her?” Mr. Nsahbinla asked again.

Instead of answering the question, Kome made several charges at the girl behind Mr. Nsahbinla.

“My friend!” teacher Nsahbinla threatened, “if you don’t stop worrying this girl, I shall teach you a lesson. See how far you have dirtied my shirt! Dare it again, you fool.”

Kome saw the teacher shimmying and girding his loins. He sized him up, and exhaled with a promise to punish the girl some other day. In going, he said, “So long as a goat has a neck, there must be a rope for it.”

“Girlie, what happened between you and that boy?” teacher Nsahbinla asked.

Ntube remained silent. She was tensed and exhausted to answer.

“Let’s return to the Mission. You are going to the Mission now?” Mr. Nsahbinla asked.

“Yes Sir. But my things are left on the road where he attacked me.” Ntube responded.

“Let’s go for them,” Mr. Nsahbinla suggested, and Ntube led the way.

They went to the spot and got the things. While on the way to the Mission, Mr. Nsahbinla got infatuated with Ntube’s beauty. He trembled and quaked. His voice broke as he struggled to tell the girl that he loved her. He rumbled the muscles of his throat several times trying to utter the words but they stuck in his throat like the bone of a fish. The distance to the Mission was getting shorter and shorter as they moved on –Ntube, innocent under the weight of her load, and Mr. Nsahbinla, conscious under the pressure of love. Just a few yards from the main entrance of the school compound, Mr. Nsahbinla picked up courage.

“Mary, I love you. I love you very much. I want to marry you.”

Ntube’s ears hummed. The proposal sent shock waves through her. She could not respond. She quickened her pace as if she was jumping over soldier ants. Mr. Nsahbinla got confused. They got to the gate prematurely to the dismay of both of them.

“Thank you, Sir,” Ntube said. “You have saved my life. Good-bye, Sir.”

Mr. Nsahbinla’s body radiated a terrible humid heat as he watched the girl disappear behind a bougainvillea hedge. He was dumbfounded. He could not follow her nor call her at the Mission grounds. On his left, was the imposing Rev. Fathers’ hill overlooking the school compound. On his right, was their hill, the junior staff hill, and in front was the senior staff hill, Ntube’s destination.

Ntube entered their house drenched with sweat. She lifted the plantain from her head and put it in the store. Then the

whirlwind of her life started. She developed instant palpitation and headache. Her mouth became sour. Mr. Nsahbinla's request struck continuous high-pitched notes in her ears. She needed somebody in whom to confide the news. How would her mother receive it? How would her mistress receive it? How will she start telling them? Furthermore, how and where and under what circumstances would she say she met Mr. Nsahbinla? She could find no ready answer to these questions. So, she decided to keep the matter to herself till Mr. Nsahbinla proved serious enough. At that time she would tell him to go and see her mother and her aunt and if they approved she would accept.

Chapter Three

On Sunday, teacher Nsahbinla went to church in glistening white shirt, shorts, socks and canvas shoes. He chose the first seat of the male side of the aisle directly opposite Ntube's godmother's seat. He got a white handkerchief and placed it on the knee-rail and knelt down, not in prayer, but to preserve the pleats of his shorts. He almost made his knees sore during the thirty-minute gospel. He was the last to go for communion. On his way back, he got the triumph of the ploy. His eyes met those of Ntube and they smiled.

After Mass, he made a bit of investigation and was shown Ntube's mother. He went and stood nearby to allow the crowd thin down around her before he went to greet her.

"Good morning mama," he greeted.

"Good morning my son," Emade answered.

"How mama, you well?" he continued.

"I well, my son" she responded.

"Mama, I just wanted to greet you. I have been told you are Mary's mother. That is why I came to greet you. God bless you till we see again. Thank you mama," he said.

"Thank you my son," Emade responded.

"Mama, I should be the one to thank you," he said again, and stretched his hand and shook hands with Emade.

After the encounter, Emade and Ntube went to greet her godmother. Then they moved on to the teachers' quarters. Nothing seemed strange. Emade conversed with teacher George and his wife on all other issues but shied away from blaming Mrs. George for letting Ntube travel alone from the Mission to Atieg. She had several reasons why she

thought Ntube hadn't to travel alone to Atieg. She could be tempted to take the short road – the road of the Brook-of-the-serpent. Uncouth boys could waylay her, several other split-second mishaps could befall her and so on and so forth. After a considerable time in the Mission, Emade returned to Atieg with shaken faith.

Two weeks later, she was cooking the evening meal. Miss Evro, a lady teacher in the Girls' School entered the hut. Although she was a girl from Atieg, she hardly visited Emade. She always greeted her from a distance.

"What has happened today? A star has fallen from heaven. It may be my death is fast approaching. Am I seeing well? Daughter-of-the-firefly, are you the one?" Emade inquired.

"I am the one. A star has not fallen from heaven. I have not brought death. I have just come to eh, eh, eh," Miss Evro stammered.

Emade gave her a seat close to the door of the hut to avoid smoke.

"With what shall I entertain the firefly that lights the way for weary travellers?" Emade asked, and stretched her hand to the ceiling. She got the smoked foreleg of a porcupine and tore its skin open. She tore off the flesh and gave Miss Evro to eat. It was so tasty that Miss Evro chewed in silence for some time before she broke the silence.

"*A nye* Emad'," she addressed Emade. "Let me not become the man who went to borrow an antelope skin but lost it because of food. It is said, a man went to borrow an antelope skin from his friend. On arrival, he was invited to eat. He thus thought of making his request after eating. Another person came in for the same antelope skin and was also invited to eat, but before he sat down to eat, he made his request and was given the skin. The first person lost the skin. What has brought me here is a very private matter. Teacher Nsahbinla has sent me to tell you that he wants to be your child as Ntube is your child.

Emade listened. Her cooking went on with systematic dexterity. After a pretty long silence, Emade said in a hiccough that she had heard but could not respond immediately.

Miss Evro was impressed with Emade's reaction. That was the natural way of responding to a situation like that. Emade had no reason to be excited or angry. Only women with overgrown girls showed anxiety in marriage proposals. Ntube was still very young. So Emade had all the time to think things over.

"*A nye* Emad'," Miss Evro called. "I thank you very much. I am going. I shall tell him that you said you should be given some time. As I have said, we should keep it a secret. Good night."

"Good night, daughter-of-the-firefly."

Mr. Nsahbinla was impatient at the hammock where he was waiting for Miss Evro. When she finally came, his heart throbbed with anxiety.

"Miss," he called. "Are things bad? You have kept too long."

"Not really. That woman and her daughter are tough. Remember when you sent me to Ntube, I told you she listened attentively and told me to go and see her mother. Any other girl would have shown emotions. Her mother too has behaved in the same way. She says I should give her some time to think over the matter. I believe she will accept."

"Miss, don't you think if you had carried the gift, things would have been easier?"

"Easier! A gift might have spoilt the matter. It might have put her in a seductive situation and angered her."

"Our next strategy is seeing the girl's mistress. You must see the girl again. We must press the matter at all sides. The girl has done her final exam and I wish the wedding to take place at Christmas."

Miss Evro laughed sardonically. "That girl has eaten your heart. I am afraid you are going to let the cat out of the bag yourself."

"How long do we have to wait to see Mary's mother again?"

"Let's give her two weeks. Meanwhile, I shall see Mary herself tomorrow. I shall not want to see her mistress because she may reveal the matter. A girl like Mary might have been betrothed in childhood. So, one has to be cautious in wooing her."

Miss Evro saw Ntube again and Ntube insisted that all depended on her mother. If her mother accepted, she would accept. With that, Mr. Nsahbinla thought of coaxing Ntube's mistress into putting pressure on Ntube's mother.

"Don't see anybody yet," Miss Evro advised. "Allow me see *nye* Emade again before we device other strategies. I believe she will give her accord this time."

On Friday, two weeks after the first encounter, Miss Evro visited Emade again. Emade welcomed her cordially. Miss Evro sat down confidently and after a few jokes introduced the purpose of her second visit.

"*A nye* Emad', I have come back for the small conversation we had two weeks ago."

"Daughter-of-the-firefly, two weeks ago? What was it all about? Where did we meet? I can't remember."

"Two weeks ago I came here and you entertained me with dry porcupine meat. Then I told you that Mr. Nsahbinla, a teacher in the Mission had sent me to tell you that he wanted you to be his mother as you were Ntube's mother.

"What does that mean?"

"You are those who teach us language. Do you want me to teach you what it means? It means that he wants to marry Ntube and thus call you mother-in-law."

Emade breathed with a sinister wrinkle on her face.

"Does he say he knows me?"

“Yes. He knows you very well. If you can remember, he greeted you in front of the church about a month ago.”

“A month ago! I can’t remember. People greet others in front of the church. Does that mean greetings have become the concomitant of marital arrangements? Go and tell him I don’t know him. How do I deal with a person I don’t know? Put yourself in my place. Can you?”

“It is surprising that you say you don’t know teacher Nsahbinla the choir master.”

“Where does he come from?”

“From Bansa.”

“Where is Bansa?”

“In Bamenda”

“Where is Bamenda?”

“In Southern Cameroon.”

“Where is Southern Cameroon?”

Miss Evro gasped for an answer and exhaled in defeat. There was a long silence. At last she continued. “*A nye* Emad’, Cameroon is our country. Atieg is in Cameroon. Bansa too is in Cameroon. We are all in Cameroon.”

“How far is Bansa, from here to Muabag?”

Miss Evro laughed and covered her face with both hands to hide her cynicism.

“Bansa is far, very far.”

“Are you married?”

Miss Evro took offence. She shut up. She stood up to go but sat down again to continue the conversation.

“*Nye* Emad’, I am an emissary. An emissary is never victimised in carrying out her mission.”

“Daughter-of-the-firefly that lights the way for the weary traveller, you are just doing your job. I shall not kill you but tell me, what do you say Mr. Nsahbinla wants?”

“He wants to marry your daughter, Ntube.”

“Go and tell him....he is the son of a woman as Ntube is the daughter of a woman....tell him....I have said he should go back to Bansa....to his own village or

neighbouring village....and look for a girl there and marry....or, does he say Bansa women don't give birth to 'long necked' girls?...let him look for a girl who will know their tradition, who will be her mother's mother, and his mother's mother when they get old....a girl whose offspring will be proud bearers of the ancestral norms and names of two genuine Bansa kinsgroups....tell him....if I had a son like him....a thing that goes foraging for women in foreign lands, I shall wrench his neck....ask him whether he came here to work or to marrytell him....even if Ntube were spited and rejected by Bakossi boys, he can never, never marry her....tell him to carry his bad breath to his tribe...Ntube is married."

The gall with which Emade spoke, the pauses steaming with hate, made Miss Evro tremble. She lost a heartbeat. She clucked in sympathy with Mr. Nsahbinla and bid Emade good bye. On her way, she appreciated Emade's crude logic. But then, she thought shaking her head, the world was fast changing, and institutionalised tribal boundaries were gradually disappearing.

Miss Evro found it difficult to tell Mr. Nsahbinla the sad news. However, she could not avoid it. So she told him almost verbatim Emade's rejection of his request. She added that judging from the bitterness with which she spoke, it was better for him to give up the venture.

Mr. Nsahbinla stood petrified. He saw the void of life. He slumped into a wooden sofa and dozed off. The next morning, he confronted Miss Evro.

"Miss, you are an Atieg girl. Do you know the fellow who betrothed Mary?"

"To the best of my knowledge, it is one despicable fellow called Ewang-Ename. He is a trapper. That is what people say. I have every cause to believe it because *nye* Emade is very close to the fellow. They are always together,"

“A trapper? A fellow like that, to marry Mary! Terrible, Miss. A nincompoop! Miss, I have not lost. Though you think we should give it up, I shall fight till I actually lose Mary to that man.”

“You can go on, so long as you do not involve me any more. That woman’s words stab with the mercilessness of a bayonet.”

“Miss, let’s go for the girl. Let’s take the attack to her. Once we win her, we win her mother. That is what I think.”

“Didn’t you hear what she said? She said that if her mother accepted she would accept. That shows that she is very attached to her mother. So, give it up.”

“Let’s try again. Those words were first words. Now that she knows her mother’s stand she will counter with her stand. I am sure we shall win her.”

Ntube was very disappointed with her mother’s rejection of Mr. Nsahbinla’s proposal. She wept bitterly. She saw her future ruined. All along, she had been dreaming of becoming a teacher’s wife – Mrs. Nsahbinla, for whom school children would bring firewood, would wash and iron clothes, would carry water and call, her Madam. All that was bashed to the ground and shattered like broken china.

Chapter Four

Ntube's reaction gave Mr. Nsahbinla the courage to continue his bid to win her. He became bolder and started daring into Mr. George's house. News soon reached the Rev. Father about his violation of Mr. George's premises. Mission ethics forbade isolated contacts between men and women in the Mission. The Father himself had watched with deep concern, Mr. Nsahbinla's frequent intimate conversations with Miss Evro. He had used his Second World War binoculars to spy on them and was waiting to take action.

Emade on her part, did not rest on her laurels. Four days after her last encounter with Miss Evro, she went to the Mission in the evening. Ntube welcomed her without betraying her bitterness against her rejection of Mr. Nsahbinla's request. Emade made a survey of the contours of her daughter's body and nodded. With that display of adult femininity, no unmarried man would spare her. The Mission was therefore an unsafe place for Ntube. Emade remembered that she once stubbed her foot about Ntube's stay in the Mission and all hell broke loose in her mind.

"Sophie," she called, her voice strained with anxiety. "If you see a ratmole in the afternoon, know the floodlock of its burrow has been broken through. Know its life is at stake. The Mission has become unsafe for the daughter-of-the-upstream-python. I want to take her home now."

"*A nye* Emad'," Sophie addressed Emade. "My husband has taken appropriate action against the news that is compelling you to ask for Mary's return. I think she is not in danger. So allow us prepare for her return."

“What do you want to prepare for her? Let her get ready. We are returning now. Ntube might have been brewing things here with Miss Evro and Mr. Nsahbinla. Miss Evro has been in my place twice to tell me about Mr. Nsahbinla’s intention. I know Ntube gives her accord. And that is why she comes.

Sophie’s face wrinkled in anger. She sent for her husband and within minutes, Ntube was packing to return to Atieg. Mother and daughter reached Atieg in the night. After a light evening meal, they went to bed.

It did not take Ntube any time to adjust to her mother’s dictates. Every evening, she carried food to Ewang-Ename. There was nothing wrong with that routine. She had done it before she went to the Mission. She was doing it again. The only thing that worried her was her mother’s surveillance. The only place she did not escort her to was Ewang-Ename’s house though it was isolated upvillage. After three weeks of being virtually under the apron strings of her mother, Ntube gradually lost the Nsahbinla syndrome. Her relationship with Ewang-Ename started worrying her. At first, she thought he was her brother. Then rumours filtered in that he was a fiancé. She had no emotional attachment to him. She entered his house freely and even went into his bedroom with no second thoughts. His conduct was not suspicious.

One Thursday evening, Ejolle visited his friend Ewang-Ename. Ntube brought in food, placed it on a bamboo platform in the parlour and then went to the bedroom and got the palm wine Ewang-Ename had kept for her mother. Then she returned.

“*A mme*,” Ejolle called his friend. “Do you see Ntube? Does her body tell you anything? You think by being nonchalant you are doing her any good? It may be you want her rotten ripe before you decide to take her in. But let me tell you, ‘If you want roasted pork to cool before you eat it, it may cool in somebody else’s mouth. Food is never sour in

the presence of two pigs.' You may live to regret. If that girl comes here tomorrow and you leave her go, I shall tell stories about you. It may be your bravery ends in killing buffalos."

"*A mue*, I have been thinking about that myself. My problem is *Nye Ahone*. She insists on church marriage. Unfortunately, I am not yet prepared for it."

"Arrange for an early marriage. Take the girl in. You will have a brawl with the Rev. Father for not marrying in church. He may stop you and *Nye Emade* from receiving communion. But that will be all. He cannot dismiss you as he dismisses his teachers.

"If that be the case, I shall go to Nkongsamba for drinks and other things. When I return we shall arrange the marriage."

"Even before that, you should own the girl. There should be evidence that you own her. And that is my point. Or, do you want me to take you to the traditional doctor?"

"As you say."

On Sunday, Ntube and her mother went to church. To avoid conversation that would lead to discussing the withdrawal of Ntube from the Mission, Emade did not visit anybody. She ordered Ntube to return with her. On their way back, Ejolle and Ewang-Ename caught up with them. For Ejolle to put up his case, he told Ntube and her friends to go ahead. Then he told Emade what he had suggested to his friend Ewang-Ename.

"I am not the huddle. If my son Ewang-Ename wants to take his wife even now, I have no objection. The Rev. Father has nothing to do with my daughter."

Ewang-Ename felt his body vibrate with excitement. He had been too conventional, too lukewarm about Ntube, daughter-of-the-upstream-python.

"I shall take Ntube in next Ngomboku market. That is six days from now. I shall leave for Nkongsamba tonight."

As Ntube, Ebude and other children moved ahead, they planned on where to go fishing. They settled on the confluence of Rivers Chide and Chong. Emade could tolerate Ntube go there because it was near Atieg and posed no danger. When Ntube suggested it to her upon their arrival home, she did not object.

Ntube and her friends got to the confluence of the two rivers and to their dismay met a bevy of Ngomboku girls fishing.

"Let's go to the Kumbo Quarters section of River Chong," Ebude suggested.

"The tadpoles of that section of the river are as big as those here," Ebane seconded.

"I shall not go that far. My mother may come and find out if we are actually fishing here. I shan't go," Ntube said emphatically.

"Let's go. Your mother will not come here," Ebude tried to convince Ntube.

"Even if she does not come, if she hears that I went that far she will skin me. I shall not go."

"We shall not tell anybody. *A mue* Eban', shall we tell anybody?"

"No, we shan't.

"If you tell, what shall I do to you?"

"Kill us," the two girls responded in unison.

"Swear,"

"We swear to God."

With that, the children left for the Kumbo Quarters section of the river Chong.

Chapter Five

Quite a sizeable number of Kumbo people had settled at Ngomboku in the quarters named after them around 1927 when the Baseng Mission was founded. Behind the quarters, flows river Chong. The road leading to the section of the river Ebude and her friends chose, passed by Mr. Nsahbinla's uncle's house by which he (Mr. Nsahbinla) had built a room and parlour attachment as a holiday resort.

Mr. Nsahbinla had returned from church completely dispirited because he could not greet Ntube and her mother. His splenetic thoughts about the loss of Mary Ntube could not find solace around the Mission. So he had decided to go to Kumbo Quarters to soothe his pains among his people.

Ebude, Ebane and other girls forged ahead, each trying to reach the river first to choose a vantage place to fish. Ntube plodded behind with the fear that her mother would eventually know that she had gone beyond the confines of Atieg. By the time she got to Mr. Nsahbinla's house, her friends had disappeared at a bend.

Teacher Nsahbinla sat on a chair by the window overlooking the road. He had sat there brooding over his problems. Time and again, he dozed off but woke with a start whenever his head dropped to a point of crashing to the floor. At this particular time, he had just woken from a near crashing situation. He put his two elbows on the table and rested his chin in both hands. The world seemed to have come to an end. He thought of Ntube and the possibility of losing his job. The Rev. Father had hinted some teachers that because of bad conduct, Mr. Nsahbinla would be dismissed and they in turn leaked it to him.

Mr. Nsahbinla dozed off again. His hands parted and with a sudden nod, he nearly hit his head on the table. He got up and stretched himself and peeped out. And there, there was Ntube coming, coming toward his house - alone.

"Sent by providence or a damn-the-consequences visit?" he asked himself. "Mary, Mary", he called. "Mary come, come Mary," he invited.

Ntube heard the sensational voice. It was reminiscent of something. She had heard it before but in that misty moment she forgot where and when. There was only one house in the vicinity. Instinctively she moved to the house and stood by the door. She peeped into it to ascertain that the familiar voice came from there.

"Mary, Mary come in," the voice invited again.

Ntube peeped in again, and lo! Mr. Nsahbinla. A mysterious force neither repulsive nor appealing took possession of her. She tensed up. She trembled and succumbed to the invitation for better and for worse.

The Ntube that later hurried to meet her friends in the river was a completely different Ntube. She was now an emotional whirlwind. She could now defy consequences and take her decisions. When she got to the river, she sat on a boulder and watched her friends fish.

"*A mue* Ntube, what are you doing on that rock? Why are you not fishing? Are you afraid that we shall tell your mother? If your mother knows anything about it then it is you, you who have told her," Ebude said in anger. She dipped her fishing net in water and after washing it, urged the other girls to do the same and return with the promise that Ntube would never accompany them to any fishing expedition again. They feigned that Ntube too had participated in fishing by dipping her net in water. Each of them then gave her some fish. Ebude gave her almost half of her catch. Each girl returned with a handsome catch.

Chapter Six

Emade was extremely impressed with Ntube's catch. She showered her with praises and kisses. But unlike the former Ntube, this metamorphosed Ntube did not return the cuddling. She wore a scrofulous face and curled up in bed while her mother prepared the evening meal. Emade did not question that marked indifference in the daughter-of-the-upstream-python. She thought the girl had overstrained herself lifting boulders to have the catch she had brought.

"Mother," Emade called her. "I know you are exhausted. I know you were lifting large boulders to catch the tadpoles and frogs you have brought. I nearly told you today not to go fishing at the confluence because the Ngomboku women over exploit that part of the rivers. Should I warm water for you to massage yourself?"

Ntube did not respond. She lay in bed and watched her mother season the fish with ground plantain powder and choice spices. Emade tied it in three bundles, dug into the wood ash and put the bundles there. Then she spread hot wood ash on the bundles and covered it with glowing coals. When the fish was partially ready, she removed it and put it on a roasting lid –a broken piece of iron pot, which she placed on the fire to roast things with delicate artistry.

Ewang-Ename came in just when Emade was turning the bundles for the last time. He came to tell her that he would be travelling to Nkongsamba early in the morning before cockcrow.

“My son, you are welcome. God has brought you. I was contemplating on who would climb the hill for me to come and give you food. Ntube is exhausted. She had tugged and lifted boulders in the river to the point that she has not uttered a word ever since she returned from fishing. I shall serve you your food here. Or, if you like, you can carry it yourself,” Emade said.

“I shall eat it here. I have come to tell you that I shall leave for Nkong tomorrow morning.”

Ntube watched in disgust as Emade served Ewang-Ename with the choice frog Ebude had given her. She eyed him sideways and turned her back and slept. When he finished eating, he left for his house and the next morning, he left for Nkongsamba.

For three days, Ntube remained in bed tormented by anxiety. Emade became restless with a mind split between accusing the Atieg people of having bewitched her, and holding fatigue the culprit of Ntube's demise. On the fourth night, Ntube gathered a few of her belonging and sneaked away while her mother was deep asleep. She left the door shut but not locked. On her way, close to the hammock, she saw a light coming. The light switched on and off. She took cover behind a huge tree and before long, a person heavy with load passed by. She emerged from behind the tree and presently was knocking at Mr. Nsahbinla's window.

In the morning, her mother woke up in high spirits. Ewang-Ename had returned that night. She remembered he woke her up to announce his return. They conversed for a short while then he proceeded to his house. It may be the door creaked. She could not remember in that half-awake state. What might have happened? Things blurred in her mind. She looked around. There was no daughter-of-the-upstream-python. The door was shut but not locked. So, the pride of her heart, the daughter-of-the-upstream-python might have gone to welcome Ewang-Ename. Emade's heart leaped up with joy at the thought that Ntube being elated

and anxious, had gone to welcome Ewang-Ename that early morning and was undoing her fiancé's bundles, selecting the best of everything he had brought.

"A man who has travelled all night needs food early," Emade said and started preparing cocoyam pudding with the hind leg of a porcupine. She made it light to make it act as a stimulant. It was to be drunk hot, like tea. She waited for Ntube to return and then go back to serve her fiancé. As the minutes rolled by, Emade became itchy.

"If a woman's husband returns from a journey and she goes to welcome him, does she not return?" she asked, and went out to peer at the distance that separated Ewang-Ename and her. Presently, Munge, one of Ntube's friends came around. Emade asked her whether she had seen Ntube in the village. The girl said she had not. "OK, go and give this food to my son Ewang-Ename and tell Ntube to return. Tell her I want to go to the bush."

The girl returned and told Emade that she did not see Ntube at Ewang-Ename's house and that Ewang-Ename said he too had not seen Ntube since he returned.

"Where should she be? She has never had the habit of visiting people in the morning. Where should the daughter-of-the-upstream-python be? Has she gone to Ekenzu? Has she gone for morning Mass?" Emade asked herself, her heart pounding with anxiety. She called Ebong-Epie and sent him to Ekenzu to find out if Ntube had gone to see her aunt.

"*A nye* Emad', *nye* Ahone says Ntube is not with her. I told her that you said Ntube has been missing since morning. She was very disturbed and told me to tell you that you should send somebody to look for her in the Mission at her godmother's place, Sophie's place and that of the teacher they say has been wooing her".

Emade was immediately seized by a fit of trembling. She stared at the void of the sky with prayers for mystical intervention. She wanted her daughter, the daughter-of-the-

upstream-python. A house to house search was carried out in the village. All Ntube's friends were questioned. Children were sent to the Mission. Yet Ntube was nowhere to be found. At last it dawned on the villagers to start believing that Ntube could be with Mr. Nsahbinla.

In the evening, it was confirmed that Ntube had been sighted at Mr. Nsahbinla's house. Now spent with anxiety and shuttles to a thousand places, Emade received the news with a serenity she had never before manifested. The whole village converged on her compound. The women who had expected to meet her wallowing in mud were stunned to see her composed as if nothing had happened. Ewang-Ename was equally composed. Ejolle was however very angry. He suggested that they dash to Kumbo Quarters, beat up Mr. Nsahbinla, seize Ntube, bring her back and charge teacher Nsahbinla of adultery.

"Why?" asked Ewang-Ename.

"Because Ntube is your wife. Do you think you had to work for Mr. Nsahbinla? Can you imagine the thorns that tore your clothes and pierced your soles while trapping in the wild bush to feed Ntube?" Ejolle snapped.

"Look, *A mue*," Ewang-Ename said. "If you go fishing and a frog jumps out of your net into the deep pool, do you also jump into the pool? You keep fishing. If you are lucky you can catch another frog larger than the first. If you don't, you return."

"What a lame excuse! A human frog takes 16 years to catch. You lose one, and start fishing to catch another? Suppose you don't catch, what will you say? If you lose frogs when your bones are full of marrow what will happen when the marrow dries up? Do you think you will live forever? I may have to tell stories about you. Your down may be dead," Ejolle remarked.

"Did you hear the conversation between Ejolle and Ewang-Ename?" a woman asked her friend as they moved upvillage. The others burst into a hoot of laughter.

“Ejolle seems to be crying more than the bereaved. When Ewang-Ename and *nye* Emade had no teeth, they chewed dry corn. Now that they have, they are shying from chewing. If Ntube had escaped to a Bakossi boy, they would have been tearing down the village baobab tree,” one of the women remarked.

“I believe that is not a very fair assessment of the situation. If one farts, one reveals the state of her bowels. If one talks, she reveals the state of her mind. But if one keeps silent, she confounds onlookers. I know that woman. Something sinister is brewing up in her. Even Ewang-Ename is a furnace of anger now, and I can conjecture what will happen if he meets teacher Nsahbinla,” Mesame chipped in.

Chapter Seven

Emade remained calm till evening. All of a sudden, she jerked as if bitten by an ant. The thought that the daughter-of-the-upstream-python had been, and would be in the service of somebody else's groins rather than those of Ewang-Ename rent her soul. She called Ebong-Epie and sent him to Kumbo Quarters with an *asong* (knotted grass, to which she tied red pepper). "Tell my mother, daughter-of-the-upstream-python that I want to see her here now, now, before this spittle dries up," she said and spat on the ground.

Ebong-Epie dashed off, got to Kumbo Quarters, delivered his message and returned to report; "When I gave her the knot, she pouted and spat. She did not even greet me. I told her that you wanted her to return with me but she remained as silent as a stone till I left."

The next day, Ngomboku market day, Ahone came down to see Ntube. For the first time, Ntube realised that even her aunt could be hostile to her. She thought Ahone would be more understanding. But to her surprise even she did not approve of her action. The way Ahone entered the house and the way she spoke rang a bell in her.

"A Ntube," Ahone addressed her. "If you knew what you have done to your mother, you won't be here now. Furthermore, your mother sent you a *Muankum* message and you ignored it with impunity? Don't become the crab that is killed with its own pincers. You may live to regret your intransigence. Whoever told you that one bites the finger that feeds her? You have stabbed your mother and wiped the dagger on her body. You have rubbed our pride in mud.

You have deprived us of the bangles of pride. But when a finger touches faeces, it is not cut. It is washed and used again as if nothing had happened. I am going to the market now. On my way back, I shall take you along. Your mother cannot oppose your marriage to Mr. Nsahbinla. But she has to have the honour of giving you to him in accordance with our tradition. So, tell him to get ready to refund all that Ewang-Ename spent on you. I hear he says he spent £200. That is a modest demand. I bear witness to what he did for us. When Mr. Nsahbinla pays that, we shall bring you to him with the honour that befits the daughter-of-the-upstream-python."

Ntube remained as silent and defiant as a grave. She drew her nose as if she had smelt something obnoxious. Her aunt got the message, walked out and left for the market. On her way back, she went to see Ntube again in spite of her previous insolence. Ntube showed no sign of capitulation, so, Ahone returned alone.

Two days later, on Muambong market day, Emade called *Sango* Achebe, the eldest person in the village. *Sango* Achebe had been the priest of the Brook-of-the-Serpent until his conversion into Christianity. He was smallish in build and as hard as a stone. Most people thought that his conversion did not change him. They thought he was a wizard.

"*A Sango* Achebe," Emade addressed him. "You are the oldest person in this village now. I don't think you can allow a hen hatch in public. So, though your strength is waning, I beg you to go to Kumbo Quarters now and bring my daughter." She stretched her hand and took a soot-laden basket from the ceiling and handed it to him. "If you get there," she continued, "show this basket to the daughter-of-the-upstream-python. Tell her it is her basket-of-the-child – the basket in which the ritual items of her naming ceremony were put. Tell her to return with you. If she refuses to return, bring back the basket."

Sango Achebe got to Kumbo Quarters when *Sango* Thomas Mebune was settling a boundary dispute between two Kumbo people.

“*A mue* Mebun’, I am happy to meet you here. You made these people settle here. One of them, a teacher with the Mission, has a problem with us. I am an emissary. Come and bear witness to what I shall tell him. Let’s also call Mr. Benedict their Quarter-head,” *Sango* Achebe said.

The three entered Mr. Nsahbinla’s house and sat down. Mr. Benedict sent for five other Kumbo people. When they came, they called Ntube and Mr. Nsahbinla and *Sango* Achebe presented his case.

“My friends,” he addressed the assembly. “If you see an ant cross a river, know there is a rail across the river. So, there is a rail that has made me cross to this side. If a person carries a he-goat, he smells like one. Even if he puts it down, he still smells like one until he bathes with soap. If one sees a lock of wool on the road, he should know that it dropped from a sheep. If one sees a girl in school or anywhere, he should know she was born by a woman. I have not come here for a court case. I have come to take Ntube. Her mother wants her. So, Ntube, get ready and let’s go.”

Ntube sniggered from the suggestion. She drew her nose and coughed in defiance. She peered at the speaker with wild catlike eyes. The assembly got the message. *Sango* Achebe got the basket-of-the-child and showed it to her.

“Can you recognise this basket?” he asked.

“Yes,” Ntube responded.

“What basket is it?” *Sango* Achebe asked again.

“She told me it was the basket of my naming ceremony.”

“Do you know its significance? Do you know why she is still keeping it?”

“Nnnnno.”

“Know therefore that she has been keeping it in order to transfer the act of motherhood to you when you get married and beget a child. Then, she will throw away the basket in a

small ceremony and declare you the dual mother of your child, and her. She too will become your child. You will become the mother of the young and of the old. That is why we say, when the oryx is old, it sucks its young. Your mother has sworn by this basket that you should return with me. If you refuse to return from now to eight days, that is, on the Ngomboku market day, she will conclude that you are not ready to become her mother. I am leaving this basket here with the Quarter-head. Whenever the Kumbo people think it wise for you to return, take it and bring it along. But that should not be later than Ngomboku market day.

The Quarter-head and the rest of the assembly got the venom of the message. They discussed the matter and pleaded with *Sango* Achebe to return. They said they would put pressure on Ntube and Mr. Nsahbinla as time went on, and were sure they would listen to them.

On his way back, *Sango* Achebe full of himself for thinking the Kumbo people had capitulated sang praise songs for himself.

The deity has come. The deity has come.

If we are not deities, who are the deities?

The deity has come, the deity has come.

Emade heard the song from a distance. She knew it signified success. A man could not claim to be a deity in a failed mission. She prepared herself to embrace the daughter-of-the-upstream-python. She ran out and faced the direction from which the song came. The singing came closer. She ululated prematurely. The praise singer came in view alone. The ululation had drawn quite an anxious crowd.

“Where is my mother, the daughter-of-the-upstream-python? Where is the string that holds my heart in place? Where is the borderline between the earth and the sky? Where is the sky-bound summit of Kupe-Mountain? Tell me yoyoyoyoyo, tell me yoyoyoyo,” Emade burst into tears.

“She is coming. She will be here very soon. Let’s go to the house for me to tell you how we have arranged things,” *Sango* Achebe said.

Emade demurred to all that *Sango* Achebe told her.

“Now that you have left the basket there, I don’t know what to do. You have given her up to a day before the Ngomboku market day. That is seven days from now. You say the committee said she would return in a few days time. Nothing is precise. If the daughter-of-the-upstream-python shuts her door against me, I shall shut mine against her. But now, you have put me in a misty position. However, seven days is not a lifetime.” She said.

Five days after *Sango* Achebe’s mission, Mr. Nsahbinla received a letter from the Rev. Father terminating his appointment as a teacher with the Catholic Mission Baseng.

“Mary,” he called Ntube from the kitchen, “Your people have given me a death blow. They have sought and had me dismissed from my job. Here is the letter. But take note that I have lost my job because of you. So, I can’t afford to lose you. You are going to nowhere. I’ll die with you. If we are here, our lives will be in danger. So, this night, we shall escape to Buea where my brother has been appointed the new Secretary of State for Education.”

Ntube blushed with excitement. Escape would put an end to the demands for her return. And the further they were from Atieg, the safer they would be from witchcraft.

Chapter Eight

Ahone was informed of *Sango* Achebe's mission. On the sixth day, she came down to Atieg to receive a prodigal daughter on the seventh day. On the seventh day in the evening, the Quarter-head of Kumbo Quarters brought the basket-of-the-child that *Sango* Achebe had left with him with the dreadful news that Nsahbinla and Ntube had probably escaped at night to an unknown destination. He said they noticed in the late morning that Nsahbinla's door had not been opened since morning. Fearing that they might have done something dreadful to themselves, the Kumbo people decided to force-open the door. A single push and the door opened. On examination, the people discovered that the couple had taken everything of theirs and gone, leaving a note to Nsahbinla's cousin about their decision to escape.

Emade leapt up into the air and crashed into a mud pool of waste water. She wallowed, whimpered, and sometimes burst into violent weeping, crying, sobbing and shouting. A large crowd soon gathered in her compound. Ewang-Ename heard the crying and went down to see. When he was told what had happened, he went back to his house, got a machet and a touchlight and set out to chase the escapees. He chased them all night but could not catch up with them. When he got to Tombel he was exhausted and sore in the soles. In the morning, he was told that the pair had gone. He could barely walk when he set off to return. Fortunately, an overloaded Public Works Department lorry going to Ngomboku carried him and left him at Nkinchong. As he plodded homeward to Atieg, some women who were

returning from the market met him. "Wowo," one of them exclaimed. "What I saw and heard today at Atieg is hair-raising. I have never, and don't wish to witness such an occasion again. What do they say that girl did to her mother for her to mete out such destruction on her? Our people say, 'When the inside throws out, the outside picks'."

"What is in the stomach does not smell until it is farted or spoken. I don't think that woman is crazy to throw her only begotten daughter to the forces of witchcraft if she had not been stabbed. For sure, the girl might have committed an abomination. Any woman who carried her baby in her womb for nine months, and bore the pains of childbirth, cannot do what that woman did this morning. If this country had not been exfoliated by Christianity, that girl would be stricken with palsy," a second woman commented.

"People are discussing nothing else in the market but that incident. I heard some women saying that if it were in their village, that woman would be ostracised whether she was right or wrong in the matter," a third woman said.

Ewang-Ename strained his ears to hear what the women were discussing but could not understand them. The women were too noisy and fast for his pace. When finally he got home, he was struck with what had happened. There was a small crowd in front of Emade's hut – the remnant of a larger one. The ground was heavily trampled and plantain shoots far beyond the clearing of the compound were shredded. Emade was still sitting in the pool of waste water.

A mysterious change had taken place in her. She looked old twice her age. Her ruffled hair, her body coated with scales of mud, and bloodshot eyes, gave her the appearance of a mad woman. Two shrivelled flaps of once succulent breasts hung on her bare chest. A piece of mud-coated cloth barely covered her genitals. She sat there dejectedly, darting venomous glances at the entire world. When she looked up

and saw Ewang-Ename and their eyes met, they were transfixed. As if by telepathy, they read the agony in each other, and burst out crying. Ewang-Ename could not bear the sight for long. He shook his head and left for his house. Ejolle followed him. When he got in, he shrugged his shoulders and sat down.

“*A mue*,” Ejolle called. “Ntube has completely destroyed you, her mother and herself. Three of you are dead. I don’t see the miracle that will redeem the situation. You are now going to start from the scratch as if you had not betrothed a girl. It is situations like yours that make a person befriend a widow and end up not marrying, or if at all he marries, he marries a woman already at menopause. *Nye Emade* on her part will never be herself again. I don’t see her recovering from the shock. And of course, Ntube is dead and buried. From what I heard and saw, though Christianity has changed our society, I know the witches of this land cannot spare her.”

“What do they say happened after I had left?” Ewang-Ename asked.

“I shan’t be the one to tell you. I don’t think anybody will have the courage to tell you what happened. I looked for you all night but you were nowhere to be found. After all where did you go to?” Ejolle asked.

“I am from Tombel. I chased those fools all night but could not catch up with them. If I had met them, flies would have been feasting on them now. What do you say happened in my absence?” Ewang-Ename asked with a raised voice.

“*Nye Emade* did a terrible thing. The picture remains indelible in people’s minds. I wonder whether anybody will have the courage to tell you,” Ejolle said again.

“But they say people discussed nothing else in the market but the incident. What is so strange in it that they cannot tell me? If you are unable to tell me, return to your house and let me rest. I am tired.”

"When *nye* Emade heard that Ntube and Mr. Nsahbinla had escaped, she crashed onto the ground and started wallowing."

"I was there myself. That was the time I ran to my house, got a cutlass and started chasing the fools," Ewang-Ename snapped.

"Her crying continued unabated in spite of *nye* Ahone's interventions. At about 10 o'clock, I returned to my house as most people did. We thought she would cry herself out and leave the village in peace once more. But whenever I woke, I heard her voice pierce the stillness of the night at regular intervals. As if that was not enough disturbance at a certain time she got up and started crying through the village moving from one end to the other, throughout the night. People thought she was exaggerating. Sometimes my ears followed her crying as far as the lepers' cemetery upvillage, and the Brook-of-the-serpent, downvillage. It was pitiful to hear her spent voice.

At dawn, the women from the hinterland who were going to Ngomboku market inquired what was happening. They said, they had heard the crying as far away as Ekenzu. When they got to *nye* Emade's compound, they stopped to be told what was going on. The crowd swelled steadily. The rising sun started taking control of the blue sky. Behind the hills, it displayed an array of colourful tendons casting the village in a chequered shadow. I decided to see what was happening.

As the sun emerged in full view, showering man and beast with its benedictions, *nye* Emade made her way into the crowd and cleared the centre for herself. The onlookers naturally gave way as she pushed men, women and children to create ample space for herself. After obtaining ample space, she, in a split second, stripped herself naked. I say, stark naked. People covered their eyes with both hands. People were so stunned that they were virtually pinned to where they stood. She ran to the door of her hut, sat on the

foot rail, and started dragging her buttocks from the rail to the ground and right to the road. Then she got up, untied her headband, wiped her genitals with it, pointed it to the rising sun and cursed:

Ntube, daughter-of-the-upstream-python,
Ntube-*me-Emaddione*,
If I am your mother,
If I bore you in my womb for nine months,
If I gave birth to you in pain and sweat,
If I lost my life's blood in the process,
Be useless on earth.

Let the rays of the sun that bring light, bring you darkness,
Let all that bring happiness bring you sorrow,
Let your life be an endless rainy season.

As you have prevented me from calling you mother,
Let there be none you will ever call mother.
Remain alone like a boundary tree.

Let the ancestral spirits now going to the market,
Where they distribute gifts of life to young girls,
Close their eyes on you,
That none may ever call you mother.

Be useless on earth, be useless on earth.

Then she ran to the door again, got the basket-of-the-child, and ran down to the Brook-of-the-serpent. I could not follow her there. But I was told that when she got there, she threw the headband and the basket into the brook and started running back. *Nye* Ahone who might have overslept because of her age and fatigue, woke at that time and was told what *Nye* Emade had done. She chased after her and when she met with her, she forced her to tie the piece of

cloth you saw on her waist. It is horrible. She has ever since refused to eat. All she does is cry. Now her voice is so spent, she can hardly cry again. But once she recovers a bit of strength, she will start."

Ewang-Ename felt his body vibrate with anger. He thought he was wrong in giving up the chase at Tombel. He thought of taking his cutlass once more and going after Ntube and Nsahbinla. He got up and tried to stretch himself. He felt sharp pains and strain in his joints. He looked at the distance. He sighed and went to bed leaving Ejolle in his parlour.

Chapter Nine

Nsahbinla was in Buea for only two weeks when in a tribal meeting on a Sunday he met with Mr. Mbanekong, the Secretary of State for Education. He booked for an appointment with him and on Monday, the SSE received him. He told him of his plight and how he had lost his job in Baseng Mission.

“Sir, I served the Baseng Mission for seven years as a C teacher. After such a long and satisfactory service, the Rev. Father, with the conspiracy of the Bakossi people, dismissed me. They accused me of befriending with the intention to marry a girl who had been betrothed. The Rev. Father, without investigating the matter, took a rash decision. I am now without a job. So, I pray you to give me anything that can make me put body and soul together.”

“Yes, I understand. I had been a victim of such wanton behaviour myself. I remember in 1947 when I worked as a teacher in that Mission, the Bakossi people regarded us the non-natives as second class or sub-human beings. I believe they are still naughty. Right now there is nothing I can give you. We have just taken over governance from southerners and we are trying to put our people in positions of influence. Once there is an opening, I shall think of you. I shan’t forget. I believe before long, I shall create a post in my secretariat. You can go. Be confident.”

Mr. Nsahbinla did not wait for long. Six days after his encounter with the SSE, Mr. Wanki, the Education Officer for Kumba, died in a motorcycle accident. His assistant Mr. Paul Awa took over and Mr. Caius Nsahbinla, a long standing C teacher dismissed unjustly was appointed the Assistant Education Officer (AEO) for Kumba.

As AEO for Kumba, Mr. Nsahbinla had prospects of visiting Kumba Eastern area with Tombel, Nyasoso, Baseng and Bangem as the main centres. In his mind's eye, he saw himself inspecting Baseng School. The news would spread that Mr. Caius Nsahbinla, the new AEO was visiting the school he had been dismissed from. His cousin and other Bansa people would come dancing with cupped hands sealing their mouths to welcome the AEO. School children would line up and he would inspect a guard of honour. The Rev. Father and the Headmaster would be helpless. They would have no choice but to doff their hats for him. He would pretend that everything was OK. Perhaps Emade would be elated and come and shake hands with her daughter's husband.

His installation in Kumba two weeks later was quite eventful. Because the population had not heard of him, the Kumba central area contributed heavily for the occasion. Each Headmaster wanted to outdo the others in order to stand out distinctively, and thus fall within the AEO's list of favourites. All the managers of schools, all the Headmasters and service heads of other institutions, were present. The occasion was a great success. Ntube's outstanding beauty graced every aspect of it. She behaved so queenly that people thought she had been one of the secretaries trained in Nigeria.

On Wednesday, Mr. Ngwa took Mr. Nsahbinla round the offices of Education. He showed him the AEO's office and his secretariat, and introduced him to the members of staff. The next day Mr. Nsahbinla started work. Two weeks later, Mr. Ngwa received a letter from Buea granting him study leave to the University of Glasgow for a nine-month diploma course in education. Although he was elated, he doubted whether his assistant would be able to handle the two posts. He knew that Southern Cameroons hadn't enough administrators in any field. When Southern Cameroons was

administered as part of Nigeria, most of the administrators came from Nigeria and the Gold Coast. There was thus a likelihood that Mr. Nsahbinla would be asked to assume the two offices in preference to appointing Mr. Musima a southerner to occupy one of the posts. He could pose the problem of keeping secrets.

Whatever Buea had in stock for Kumba, Mr. Ngwa, a seasoned administrator, decided to keep Mr. Nsahbinla informed about the goings on in the two offices. He got the map of Kumba Division and showed Mr. Nsahbinla the areas he had visited and those he was still to visit. He had visited Kumba N.W., and S.W., and had Kumba N.E., and S.E. to visit.

“Should Buea order you to assume the two functions,” Mr. Ngwa advised, “don’t panic. You have two persons to rely on – the chief clerk, Mr. Gregory Niba, who has been here since colonial days, and my driver, Mr. Lucas Mba. Mr. Niba knows every nook and cranny of Kumba Division. He is an encyclopaedia of school problems in Kumba. Secondly, the heavy presence of our children in all offices will make your task easy. Make sure you keep official secrets. Don’t get involved with Kumba girls. I wish you luck.”

The next day Mr. Ngwa came to the office to break the news to his staff and to prepare them to work with either Mr. Nsahbinla, or a new boss from Buea. Mr. Nsahbinla plied through the files and noted down items of interest.

- i) St. Michael School Baseng is found in Kumba N.E.
- ii) Night allowance for E.O, £10; for A.E.O, £6.
- iii) Acting E.O. gets the fringe benefits of the E.O.
- iv) Equipment in the two offices to be bought from Modern Furniture.
- v) Government school teachers to be employed.
- vi) Study how correspondences are carried out.
- vii) Study the protocol of the Division.

Several things criss-crossed his mind. At a certain point, he prayed that Mr. Ngwa's prediction be fulfilled – that he should be made acting E.O. for Kumba. At another time, he thought if the population knew much about him, there would be a scandal he would be unable to handle. However, he was girding for either of the options. And of course, he was confirmed the acting Education Officer for Kumba.

Immediately Mr. Ngwa left, Mr. Nsahbinla, now acting E.O., and A.E.O. for Kumba made an official tour of Kumba South Eastern schools. It was a ten days tour of nine schools. At the end of the tour, he realised a catch he had never predicted – 21 goats, 2 pigs, 8 fowls, £3 contributed by teachers, plus £12 outstation allowance. The things arrived at night. When he ascertained that everything had arrived safely, he despatched 8 goats to key personalities in the Secretariat of Education in Buea.

A week after the tour, Mr. Nsahbinla got £12 from the treasury. He put the two amounts together and called Ntube. "Darling, where shall we keep money? For how long have we been here? For a few months only, and we are getting to the skies!"

"Let's go and pay my brideprice. Let's go and refund what *seh* Ewang-Ename said he had spent on me. I am getting worried. I am homesick. I don't know how my mother is now," Ntube responded.

"Darling, do you think you had to remind me of my obligation? The money is small. When we save sufficiently, I shall tell you it is time for us to go. We have two challenges in your place. We have to prove to your mother and her people that you made a better choice. We also have to prove to the Baseng Mission that we are better off than all of them put together. As things are, we should behave like the snake. It coils in, before it strikes. So I am going to put this money in Cameroon bank and wait to buy office furniture from Modern Furniture Victoria. I know I shall have some

handsome proceeds from there too. At that time, I shall schedule my Kumba North Eastern Area trip. I shall take you along and we shall make Baseng our last stop.”

Ntube shrugged her shoulders and gave a superfluous laughter.

“Do as you like. I know you are always right darling.”

Mr. Nsahbinla opened an account with Cameroon Bank with £30 and after two months raised a loan of £150 to be repaid in 99 years. He got £125 and after discussing with Ntube on what was needed at Atieg, he set forth for the Kumba N.E. tour with her.

Chapter Ten

He decided to inspect schools in southern Bakossi first, skip Baseng and go to Bangem in northern Bakossi. He would then inspect Baseng last and thus have enough time to handle the Ntube affair. While in Bangem, he bought a cow for £5 and the Headmaster despatched school children with it to Atieg.

The children tethered the cow at the big field because they could not lead it across the hammock. A Bororo cow tethered in plain view, drew much attention. Very soon, the neighbourhood knew that Mr. Caius Nsahbinla, the Acting E.O. for Kumba was visiting Baseng and would use the occasion to pay brideprice on Ntube, the daughter-of-the-upstream-python.

“Waah,” exclaimed a passer-by. “What God has ordained is ordained. Nobody can put out God’s candle. When that poor girl escaped with that teacher, people jeered at her for escaping with a dismissed teacher. People who blamed her for depriving her mother of the deflowering pig can now hang their heads in shame. Which Bakossi man, even the killer of buffaloes, would have killed a cow for deflowering his wife? The world is changing. Women should be allowed to marry where they want. Ntube made the right choice. Can a Bakossi man ever be an Acting Education Officer?”

Mr. Nsahbinla had driven past Kumbo Quarters without stopping. He had however left word that he would be back immediately he completed the inspection of schools in the Bangem area. He had left money for his cousin to prepare for his arrival. The Headmaster of Baseng School had been told about the visiting Acting EO’s desire to lodge at his

Kumbo Quarters residence rather than lodge at the Mission. He as such, sent children to clean the compound and repair the roof of the building.

Mr. Nsahbinla did two days in Bangem and moved down to Baseng. On his arrival, he met a very welcoming atmosphere in Baseng School. The school children lined up on both sides of the road from the border between Muambong and Ngomboku to the Mission. As the visiting couple rode slowly between the two rolls, the children threw flowers at them. Ntube was overwhelmed with emotions; time and again, her face puckered and twitched as tears formed in her eyes. The couple arrived at Baseng on time 10.30 a.m. While they hurriedly did the inspection of the 'troops' the children sang:

Sing hey, to our Acting E.O.,
Sing hey, to our new Government,
Whenever we shall tackle
We shall find it hard to tackle
Sing hey and sing ho, ho.

The Headmaster's address was brief. Although guilt tore through his veins, he was composed and respectful.

The Acting E.O. for Kumba,
Rev. Manager, Baseng (in abstentia)
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me singular pleasure to welcome our illustrious Acting E.O. in our midst today, in the person of Mr. Caius Nsahbinla, who is bestowed with the cumulative functions of E.O. and A.E.O. of Kumba.

About a year some months ago he was a classroom teacher with us. Today, he is the E.O. in Kumba. We know his humble beginnings, his dynamism, his diligence, his sociability, and his devotion to teaching, and most of all his personality.

We also know the turn of events, what we may term, and rightly of course, ‘God’s stones grinding in their own way.’ He finally left us – not short but full of our benediction directly or indirectly. Today, we are the best judges of a nondescript situation that has made us proud receivers of our teacher as the E.O of Kumba.

He is not only intricately linked to us as a teacher turned E.O. but also as our in-law. I am sure our banner flies high in both the E.O. and A.E.O. offices in Kumba and why not in Buea itself?

The school problems of this area cannot be new to him. They cannot be overemphasised. He knows them and we pray that he should use his good offices to solve them the best he can. We say all this through his wife, our daughter.

We wish them a happy stay with us and a safe return to Kumba.

Long Live the Acting E.O
Long live Baseng Mission
Long live Southern Cameroon,

Mr. Nsahbinla heard the address in patches. His mind was occupied with the Ntube affair. But he got the highlights. In his response he said,

Rev. Father (though absent)
Ladies and Gentlemen.

This particular situation is like the resurrection – a period when Christ was more than just human and a period when, if I were him, I would have embraced Judas than condemn him. For, it is through death that flesh is made whole. Today, I embrace you all because it was through death forced on me by you that we have all become whole.

My wife and I are greatly indebted to you, and as the H.M. has said, if for one reason or another I relent my efforts in bringing your problems before the authorities, she would remind me. I shall want all of us to put our shoulders to the plough.

May I use this opportunity to invite all of you tonight at Kumbo Quarters to a reception my tribe's people have organised for us. Thank you very much.

Long live the offices of the E.O. and A.E.O. Kumba
Long live Baseng
Long Live Southern Cameroon,

The Baseng staff attended the party although the Headmaster was absent. At first the teachers were shy, each under his measure of guilt. But as drinks started dictating the pace of the ceremony, they opened up. Most of them laid the blame of Mr. Nsahbinla's dismissal on the inscrutable character of the Manager, and the obsequiousness of the H.M. Mr. Nsahbinla told them that it was difficult for him to lay blames on any person because his dismissal brought blessings he would not have had if he remained a teacher with the Baseng Mission.

The more the people enjoyed the party, the more Mr. Nsahbinla prayed that it should end and thus give him time to tackle the Ntube affair. He wanted to talk to his cousin and to prepare grounds on how to go on the next day. By 2.30 a.m., he called him but he was too drunk to discuss anything. At 7.30 a.m., he tried again but the fellow was snoring deeply asleep. At 8.00 a.m., some Kumbo women who could not greet the E.O. the previous day came in to pay their homage. As they bowed down with cupped hands sealing their mouths in salutation, Mr. Nsahbinla saw a child running towards the house at top speed.

"Please pleas, ple, Sir," the child stammered breathlessly. "The cow, the cow has broken loose. The cow has broken loose and is running this way. If it crosses the river, it will be difficult to catch."

“Get school children to catch it. Go and see the H.M. quickly.” Mr. Nsahbinla ordered.

“Before I get to the Mission, it would have crossed. Today is Saturday. There are no school children in the compound”. The boy did not finish talking. There was pandemonium outside as the cow appeared at full gallop with set horns ready to bulldoze its way through any huddle. Frightened men, women and children dashed for cover into their houses. The cow was returning to Muanenguba from where it was bought. Mr. Nsahbinla yelled. The men jumped out with cutlasses and guns after the cow had passed.

“What do we do now?” one man asked.

“Let’s chase it,” another suggested.

“To escort it to Muanenguba? Do you chase cows without ropes?” the first man snapped.

“Let’s take the Quarter-head’s shot-gun and kill it when it stops. It cannot run all through. If we don’t kill it, we may lose it when it reaches Mueba. The natives will definitely drive it into the bush to frustrate our efforts, then kill it themselves after we abandon the chase,” a third person intervened.

The Quarter-head himself, a fantastic marksman told the others to follow him and the cow from a distance. The cow was climbing the Muambong hill. With the morning quiet, and finding succulent grass, it stopped to eat. Mr. Benedict caught up with it and took aim. ‘Tuuum,’ the forest echoed with the report of the shot.

“Never miss,” the people behind shouted in jubilation and started running. The cow sprang into the bush then stood transfixed with the frightful impact of the bullets. It became paraplegic, its knuckles buckled, it slobbered and slumped to the ground. The Quarter-head Mr. Benedict, moved to where it lay. He examined the place with a lot of misgivings. His people came and were about to drag the carcass to a more convenient place.

“Don’t touch that cow,” Mr. Benedict howled, his voice strained with anger. “This place seems to be a sacred place. Look at that tree. The skulls of all wild beasts of this area are hung there. See the skull of an elephant, that of a buffalo, that of a tiger, that of a hog, etc. etc. On each of the skulls there is a talisman adorned with cowries. Beneath the tree is a clay pot with assorted items and moss-covered water. We should call the natives and ask them the significance of this place before we tamper with that cow.”

Mr. Nsahbinla drove to the place with Mr. Simon Nji the constable who accompanied him on the tour.

“Pa Benedict, you have done it. But the cow has been killed too far from its destination. I wonder whether I shall be able to convince my in-laws to come and butcher it here,” Mr. Nsahbinla said.

“Let it be put in the vehicle. The Land-Rover is meant for such jobs,” Mr. Nji suggested.

“That is what we wanted to do but Pa Benedict stopped us. We wanted to drag the carcass to the road so as to put it in the Land Rover.”

“Let’s get ropes and drag it to the main road.”

“No. I have told you that this place is a sacred place and we have to wait for the natives before we lay hands on that carcass. See, by the side of that pot is the cord that the Bakossi people tie round the necks of nursing mothers and waists of babies. This place is pregnant with ritual significance.”

“What does the Quarter-head mean? Pa, do you mean we have to stay here now till those bastards come and tell us to carry our cow away?” Mr. Nji asked, and ordered his men to drag the cow to the road. As the men tied the cow with ropes they heard war songs. Chief Epinkwele and his councillors came from Muambong. They sang war songs as they approached the area. After singing three songs and not getting a reply in song, they shrieked to ascertain whether the people at the grove were for peace or for war. There was no response again. They nudged each other in surprise.

“I told you today to arm yourselves, you refused. You said things of old are long gone. See now, Ngomboku people are ready for war. They ignore us”.

Before the speaker finished, they heard strange noises interlaced with foreign languages in the grove. Mr. Mbuoge who had taken his cutlass with him forged forth, and to his surprise, found non-natives in the sacred grove. He yelled twice and his people rushed to the spot.

“Misa Benedict, what has brought you here?” chief Epinkwele asked in anger.

“Our cow has died here. We want to carry it away.” somebody responded.

“Your cow? The cow left all other places and chose to die here?” a young man asked with scorn.

Chief Epinkwele stepped forward and examined the position of the cow. “Don’t get contaminated with catarrh from the muzzle of a dog. The cow has died on the Ngomboku side. It is Ngomboku cow.

Chief Esambepie and his councillors came in just when chief Epinkwele was completing his last sentence. They examined the position of the cow and sang victory songs. Some of the councillors made shuttle runs and clasped hands overhead in victory salute.

“Do we have to go through this buffoonery before we act?” Mr. Nji asked in anger.

“Let’s tow the cow away. Stupid,” he insulted.

Some Kumbo boys rushed to the carcass with ropes. “Don’t touch that cow. Touch it, and you will catch Muankum by the tail,” a Ngomboku young man threatened.

Finding that the Kumbo people were stunned with what was going on, chief Epinkwele called Mr. Benedict and advised him to tell his people to keep quiet. “It is unfortunate that your cow has died in a sacred place. This place (Asongwaa) is a boundary between two villages and two clans – the Ngomboku village and the Banbengong village,

and the Muetan clan and the Muambong clan. Any animal that dies or is killed here becomes a state animal. If it dies on the Ngomboku side, it becomes Ngomboku animal and vice versa. So, since this cow has died on the Ngomboku side, it belongs to the Ngomboku people. Whatever they give us for bearing witness, we shall take, and whatever they give you, you should take in good faith,”

Mr. Nsahbinla listened keenly. He felt the spikes of anger tear through his veins. He could not understand why a cow meant for brideprice payment was being converted into a communal animal because it died in a given place. As he pondered over it, Mr. Nji who was conversing with the Quarter-Head ordered that the cow be carried to the Land Rover.

Mr. Oscar Elong thought the use of force was not the ideal thing to do. He called Mr. Nsahbinla and advised him to bribe certain Ngomboku key personalities. Mr. Nsahbinla then drove back for money. He asked Ntube to give him £2. As he set back for the place, he saw people running helter-skelter from the grove. The natives ran for their lives. The only people who did not run were the chiefs, probably because they could not. To Mr. Nsahbinla's surprise, he found the cow dragged to the road. Mr. Nji, the police constable, his gun set, placed his foot on the head of the cow in a victory posture, smarting bloodshot eyes at all corners to see who would dare challenge his authority.

“Where are they?” Mr. Nsahbinla asked, on his return to the place.

“The cowards have run. Fools,” Mr. Nji insulted with a quavering voice. “This cow was killed since morning. It is almost half past one now. Soon, it will start decaying. So, the law had to take its course. I am the law here. This is not 1947. Load the cow into the vehicle.”

Mr. Nsahbinla thanked him and they drove the cow to the big field and sent a boy to Atieg to invite Emade, (Ntube's mother) and her people to come and butcher it.

Emade swore by the deities of Kupe and Muanenguba mountains that she had never begotten a daughter called Ntube. The Atieg people tried to persuade her. They made descriptions of the daughter-of-the-upstream-python. They said her husband was now a big man in Kumba. Yet, the daughter-of-the-deities-of-Kupe-Muanenguba refused she had ever begotten a daughter known as Ntube-*me-Emaddione*, daughter-of-the-upstream-python..

The matter dragged on and on until 8.15 p.m. when Mr. Nsahbinla lost his temper and told his cousin to send word to the chiefs of Ngomboku and Muambong to come and butcher the cow. They refused. Then he asked his Kumbo people to do so. They did, but their Quarter-Head refused to be involved in the deal. At midnight, Mr. Nsahbinla, now exhausted and steaming with rage and disappointment returned to tell Ntube the sad news.

Chapter Eleven

Mr. Nsahbinla slumped into a wooden sofa to think things over. Several things criss-crossed his mind. The events of the day were contrasting with his general disposition on Ntube's matter. To him, Ntube brought him luck. He had moved from the redundant post of a C teacher to an A.E.O. and from it to Acting E.O. But what was the hell with the events of the day? As he pondered over these things, he saw his cousin skip around as if a great victory had been won. Anger welled up in him and being unable to contain it any more, he called him to order.

"Pa Kinyam, can I talk to you outside?" he requested, and they moved out of earshot close to the road where they could easily see eavesdroppers.

"Pa, what I want to say is that, I have observed with disquiet that you are not in sympathy with me. Since we returned from the big field, you have not shown any remorse for what has happened to me. You seem to like it. You seem to have conspired with the Quarter-Head to undo me. I am particularly touched by your action and would have liked to return to Kumba this night but for my wife. If I knew she could withstand the journey, I would have gone. What you people have done to us is unacceptable."

"The English man says, 'Every disappointment is a blessing,'" Pa Kinyam replied. "I say, 'Every disappointment is a blessing.' Yesterday when we were welcoming you, the Quarter-head bestowed on you the title of Fai. The supreme ruler of the Bansa people, who alone, in council, bestows titles on his subjects at home and in the diaspora, will

confirm the title at home, at Nso. But will you be Fai, and marry a foreign woman? You will not marry that your woman for two reasons. The first, I have told you. The second, I shall tell you after this story. Listen well. If you are sleepy, go and lie down. I shall tell you tomorrow. If not, listen attentively. "There was once a great hunter who had killed all the animals but the lion. So, he went around looking for a dog that could help him kill the lion. After moving from village to village, he got to the last village and told a blind man his problem. The man told him that there was a village in the vicinity but that a large tree had fallen across the road and isolated the village. If he could by-pass the tree and get to the village, he would get a dog of his description. So, the man went, got to the fallen tree and while devising means of by-passing the tree, he saw a man standing near by, and a large dog sleeping close by. It was the dog of his dream. He asked the man whether he could sell it to him. The man accepted and after the deal, he asked the man the name of the dog. "It is called, 'if you don't have eyes don't you even have ears?'" and advised the man not to call the dog's name until he (the seller) had gone far, for, the dog would stick to him (the seller) if it woke up in his presence. When the seller had gone far, the man woke the dog by calling its name. The lion got up and killed him. If you don't have eyes, don't you even have ears? Since you left here, have you not heard what has been going on here? That your woman is cursed. All Bakossi people condemn the curse. But what has happened has happened. So, you will not marry that your woman."

While Pa Kinyam and Mr. Nsahbinla conversed outside, Ntube was ruminating on the day's events. Miss Evro had told her about the curse and the necessity for her to reconcile with her mother before carrying out any other activity. She was itchy to tell her husband about it, but he had been too occupied with the cow affair.

Mr. Nsahbinla's senses convulsed at the thought of his abandoning his wife. The hubbub of conversation that followed drew in some other people.

"See, teacher," the first said. "Every indication is that the spirits of Bakossi and those of Nso are against that marriage. The policeman defied the sacred grove of two neighbouring villages by shooting into the air to drive away their dignitaries. Can that type of thing happen at Nso? Can we accept that? The people ran in silence, but do you know what is brewing up in them now? The English man says, 'Let sleeping dogs lie,' but let me add that, 'If sleeping dogs must lie, let those awake bark with restraint, because if they wake the sleeping ones, there would be chaos.' If this thing had happened at Nso, our Quarters would have been erased to the ground by now. That marriage must be discouraged."

Mr. Nsahbinla's ears hummed. A piercing shrieking-like sound deafened him. He lumbered away from the people and met Ntube. Both of them were flabbergasted and struck dumb by the day's events. They went to bed and tried to sleep.

Ntube did not sleep all night. She had done mental skimming of the situation and thought that Miss Evro's advice was the only way out. Miss Evro had told her about the curse and the need for reconciliation. So she had to reconcile with her mother and convince her husband to buy another cow or pig. As things stood, prompt action was necessary. So Ntube sent for her aunt, Ahone. She got some grass, made a knot out of it, and attached red pepper to it. "Go to Ekenzu right now, give this knot to my aunt Ahone, and tell her that I want to see her here now."

Ntube was amazed at the speed with which her aunt got to Kumbo Quarters. She had taken the Muankum message for a joke, but there was its effect.

“*Neh Ahon*’,” she addressed her aunt. “When we were going to Bangem, we left word that you should wait for us. We sent word to my mother to tell all her relatives, particularly you, that my husband would come and pay my brideprice yesterday, Saturday. We were very sure you would be there waiting for us. But the hair-raising stories Miss Evro told me yesterday, and the fact that you were not at Atieg to welcome me show that you and your sister are adamant in destroying me. Yesterday was a horrible day for us. The cow we brought for the occasion got loose and when it was shot, it died at Asongnwaa – a sacred grove. When it was finally taken from the grove, the Atieg people refused to butcher it.”

“I am hearing that story from you. Nobody told me of your visit and the plan to pay brideprice. Your mother stops dead in the middle of a conversation once your name is mentioned. So, we hardly mention you,” Ahone said.

“I know you are angry with me. But you are angry to a fault. Did you want me to be you? To think as you think? To love as you love? To breathe as you breathe? To do everything as you do and die as you will die? All that my mother wants is being taken care of when she gets sick. Has she fallen sick and she is not taken care of? Why has her self-interest overshadowed her reasoning? Why does she think that I should love her more than I should love myself? Suppose I married the man she chose for me because she would derive benefits I won’t derive, suppose in my disgust I decided to terminate my life, how will she fare on? Her love for herself should not overshadow my love for myself. If self is the primary thing, then I have the right to myself as she has to herself. I believe there is something wrong somewhere, and that is why I have called you that we put things right. We should see things in the light of their being right or wrong. And if any of us is in the wrong, she should own up and appease the others and end the matter. I have

accepted my guilt for escaping from home, not for marrying teacher Nsahbinla. The second reason why I want us to reconcile our differences is that, I want *Seh* Ewang-Ename to receive his brideprice. If my mother loves him so much, she should encourage him to receive it so that he too can look for a girl somewhere else and marry. That is the logic of things as they stand now. Refusing to take brideprice, cursing, mourning and wearing sack clothes are not the solution. A thousand sympathisers and condemnation of a recalcitrant daughter are not the solution. The solution is reconciliation and shaming the devils called sympathisers.”

Drops of sweat sprouted on Ahone’s face. The truth of what Ntube was saying petrified her. She shook her head, got up, embraced her and left for Atieg to see Emade.

Chapter Twelve

Although Mr. Nsahbinla's bid to pay brideprice on Ntube failed in this trip, Ahone's disposition for reconciliation gave them hope. They returned to Kumba the next day not in low spirits as one would have thought. The next day, in spite of fatigue, Mr. Nsahbinla went to his office to write his report of the mission. On his way back he met with Mr. J.O. Mba, the Superintendent of police who had assigned Mr. Nji to accompany him on the mission. After thanking him for the favour, he told him of his misadventure and his plans to make a second trip in two weeks. He said he did not trust Bakossi people because the fellow from whom he had seized Mary Ntube could attack him. The S.P. offered to assign another constable to accompany him on the trip.

"Masa, I hear your wife is a fantastic beauty. I hear one of the Permanent Secretaries in Buea is in serious problems now with his wife because he lost his head in your wife when he was dancing with her during your taking-over ceremony. Where did you get that pearl?" the S.P. asked.

"You see, our people can be daft. A man comes to a dance where he is representing the Secretary of State and misbehaves," Mr. Nsahbinla said with a tingling glow of pride.

"Masa, but this thing you have done does not please many people. Many of our people think that, that girl will not end up living in Bamenda after your death. She will end up living in the south with your children. Anyway, you can do as Mr. Ndifor did. He did all his investments in Bamenda, and after his death his Balondo girl had no choice but to settle where

the investments were. Or, do as Sergeant Nchotu did. He married one of these fellows, then married one of his tribe's girls. Today, his children with his tribe's girl occupy his compound in Bamenda," The SP said.

Mr. Nsahbinla looked perplexed. He eyed the SP sideways as the pangs of hatred welled up in him. He thought of blasting the SP for interfering with his private affairs, but because of the impending favour, he swallowed his anger.

In the evening, Mr. Nsahbinla went to the Mission to tell Rev. Father Joseph of his misadventure. Father Joe had insisted that Mr. Nsahbinla should marry in church. He could not be conducting the choir without receiving communion. To marry in church, he had to pay brideprice first. And only then, would the holy sacrament of matrimony have the power to cleanse Ntube of her mother's curse. Father Joe understood and sympathised with him and advised him to make a second attempt. He told him that it was because he tried to kill two birds with one stone that he lost both.

Chapter Thirteen

“What does that cursed woman say is wrong with her? If her daughter is married to a Graffiman, shall people not sleep again? Every night she cries and wails from one end of the village to another. I think the chief and the whole village should do something to confine her to her own compound,” Ekane admonished, when Emade’s shrill cry tore through the night. Many people held that view.

Two days after the cow incident, the village assembled in front of her hut to scold her for disturbing the peace of the village by crying non-stop the whole night. She heard the muttering at her door and woke up. She groaned twice, opened the door and moved to the middle of the crowd. The villagers who had not seen her since the day of the curse but had only heard her crying, were shocked to see her. She was a living skeleton. Her collar bones and ribs stuck out like those of a chameleon. She was starving herself to death. For two days since she heard of Ntube and Nsahbinla’s visit to Baseng, she had refused to drink even water. The people who wanted her reprimanded thought doing so would worsen her situation and advised the rest to withdraw from her compound. But those who bore her a grudge for depriving them of cow meat insisted that she should be reproached.

“*A nyangu* Emad’,” one of them addressed her. “We have come to tell you that from today, you should not disturb the whole village by crying from one end of the village to another. You should remain in your compound. Your daughter’s

marriage to a Graffiman does not concern us, and you know that. So, we should not be disturbed in any way. If you continue, we shall take appropriate action.”

Emade sniggered, and holding out her varicose hands asked the speaker, “*A mue*, what is left here? What can be afraid of death here? Don’t talk of the whole village. When I am passing by your door, do as you want.”

“One can be contaminated with the catarrh from the muzzle of a dog in this matter. Let’s go” somebody suggested and started moving away. The others followed. Emade returned to her hut when the last person left.

News of the siege reached Ahone. She rushed to Atieg to take her sister. Emade refused to go on another exile but promised to bathe, eat, and not cry again through the village.

“I have told you what Ntube said. I believe she is right. It is left for us now to put our heads together and see how best we can mend a bad situation. So, when they next come here, we should be at the forefront of making things work. If my mind does not fail me, they promised coming here before the end of this month. I pray nothing should happen to you again till they come and we settle that matter,” Ahone said, and returned.

Chapter Fourteen

Two days before the planned trip to Atieg, Ntube fell sick and Mr. Nsahbinla had to postpone the trip. She was in the hospital for six days and was treated of problems associated with a miscarriage. Dr. Davis attributed it to strain and sudden shock.

Five days after Ntube's discharge, Mr. Nsahbinla returned from work and met his erstwhile wife in the full glow of her former self. Her eyes had regained their natural lustre. She had once more regained her self-confidence.

"Darling, you merit a party. Our people say, 'If gourds are taken to the stream and the river bed is found dry, the gourds are taken back to be used later?'"

Ntube looked at him and turned her back. Mr. Nsahbinla understood the message. He moved to her and held her hand.

"Darling have I said something bad?" he asked.

"Gourds that return empty lose their pride of place in the household. Furthermore, have you not heard of the story of an orphan who lost a penny, and in deep grief, cried and wallowed at the cross-roads? A passer-by saw him and asked why he was crying. He said, he was crying because he had lost his lone penny. In sympathy, the man gave him one penny and beseeched him not to cry again. Immediately the man left the boy fell down and started crying again, saying that if he had not lost the first penny, he would have had two then. It is bad to lose. And there is no way one can mitigate a loss."

"Darling, I understand. I did not look at it that way. Please, it's a slip. But we should agree on one thing, we have to be

grateful that the worse did not happen and for that we have to be thankful to God. And so, I propose we have a small party.”

“We have a duty before us. We are obliged to go to Atieg and finish with my people. Once we come back, we tackle the church wedding problem before Father Joe goes on leave. And from that time, we can have parties from day to day.”

“That can’t disturb our thanking God and friends for the concern they showed when you were ill. Tell Amungwa to kill any goat of your choice. I am going to see some friends.”

The first person Mr. Nsahbinla met was Mr. Ndzeka, the Senior Superintendent of Prisons. “Baah,” he greeted. “I am lucky to find you today. I have been to your office several times and even to your house. Didn’t your houseboy tell you?”

“Children are the same all over. When I come, he tells me somebody came. He never cares to ask the name of the person. So, how are you? And why have you been looking for me?” Mr. Nsahbinla asked with misgivings.

“First, to sympathise with you and your wife for her illness. I was told she fell sick as you were about to leave for another tour. I would have visited her in hospital if I had known the ward. But it is sometimes very stupefying to wander from ward to ward looking for a patient whose name one doesn’t know. Extend my sympathy to her. I shall find time to meet her at home. Second, I wanted to tell you about our club. Since you have made two tours and we have heard nothing from you, I conclude that you do not know about it. It is a club for Senior Civil Servants and Paramilitary Personnel of our region in Kumba. It is the Return-From-Tour-Club, a pepper soup club, hosted by anyone who returns from a tour. Members, (and of course all Senior Civil Servants are members) bring their wives. The last person who hosted it was the Senior Civil Engineer in charge of Public Works, Mr. Cletus Ndzerem.”

“Thanks. I did not know about it. Mr. Cletus is my mentor here. But it seems he forgot to tell me.”

“Yes, no entrance fee. The only qualification is being a Senior Civil Servant from our area. Over pepper soup and beer, we discuss important issues – like the unity of our people, consolidating our hold on power by dispelling that myth of southern superiority from our people, and preserving our traditions and cultures.”

“I hope you are not talking of traditions and cultures that made our womenfolk dance bare-body in front of the Prime Minister, Secretaries of State and other dignitaries of Southern Cameroon and members of the Diplomatic corps. It was an appalling situation. On the last National Day celebrations, I reprimanded our womenfolk for dancing virtually naked in the name of traditions and cultures. I have already written a circular letter to all school managers and women groups discouraging barebody dancing, especially by girls and women.”

“You are right. I heard you reproached our women on that occasion. You were right. Our people cannot be political leaders and their wives expose their bodies to every Dick and Harry. It was high time somebody picked up courage to challenge that. That was great. Where will you be this evening?” Mr. Ndzeke asked as he extended his hand for a handshake.

“I am expecting some friends at home. If you won’t mind, you can call with any member of the RTC you meet. I am in fact moving round to invite some other friends.”

“With our wives?”

“Of course, yes.”

“We’ll be there.”

Mr. Nsahbinla invited a handful of friends and returned to tell Amungwa to kill two goats. He predicted that the members of the club would turn out en masse. And true to prediction, the parlour of the EO Kumba was full to capacity. Each Senior Civil Servant in Kumba brought his wife.

Mr. Nsahbinla welcomed his guests. He apologised for not knowing about the club and promised he would give a befitting party when next he returned from tour. He also apologised for his wife's state of health though there was nothing serious to worry about. With that, he asked Mrs. Ndzerem to lead the ladies to serve themselves.

The ladies served themselves as if the soup was a bad purgative. That made the men sulk and lose appetite. For the sake of politeness, they took a bit of the soup and withdrew to their respective seats. With the first sip however, the tables turned. During the second helping, the men crammed their plates to spilling point. The Senior Market Master in particular filled his so full that not only was the soup spilling, but tangles of entrails dangled from the rim. Others followed suit and presently, the room fell silent as the men munched and the women darted sinister glances at them.

The men ate and drank and discussed without much attention to their wives' comments. The women were not happy to see their husbands eat so greedily in the house of a man married to a non-Bamenda girl. They jeered at Ntube and called her names even to the hearing of Mr. Nsahbinla. At a certain point, the provocation slashed through him and he nearly drove them away. Fortunately, Mr. Ndifor, chief warden of Prisons Buea was there to advise him.

Chapter Fifteen

The party increased Mr. Nsahbinla's sphere of influence and made quite a good number of really good friends for him. He had mentioned his intention to go to Atieg and the need to hire four-wheel drive vehicles. Mr. Awuru gave him his MAN diesel truck to fuel instead of hiring, Mr. Ndzerem gave him two Land Rovers, and with his official Land Rover, he had an impressive convoy to take to Atieg. Ntube was ready. She had brushed aside the unfriendly attitude of her co-wives of Bamenda. She remembered the Bakossi song which said, 'If you are not initiated into *Ahon society* you cannot eat the liver of a goat'. She was not yet a Bamenda woman because her husband had not paid brideprice on her. So she could not quarrel with Bamenda women.

The convoy arrived Atieg on the third day of the death of *Sango Achebe*. The place was teeming with attendants of the ceremony of *ahieg*. When the people heard the revving of vehicles close by, they were stunned. They thought the Rev. Father had carried his motorcycle across the river. The wind brought in the smell of petrol. The revving of vehicles increased. The natives looked confused. Some thought of running into the hinterland. Others decided to brave the outcome, and started moving towards Emade's end of the village. As they got close to her compound, they saw to their surprise, a MAN diesel four-wheel drive vehicle rolling, bouncing, and rasping through the footpath.

Exclamations and shrieks of glee brought all the people from the deceased's compound to Emade's compound. Presently, the three Land Rovers too arrived. Constable

Ndikum jumped down and helped Ntube out. The natives went wild with jubilation. Some kissed Ntube, others embraced her and the children jumped up for her to carry them.

When the excitement died down, Ntube moved from house to house with a throng of children following her. She greeted and sympathised with people who had lost loved ones in her absence. Wherever she went, she received a heroine's welcome. One old woman was particularly elated.

"Daughter-of-the-upstream-python, we thought we shall never see you again. Your mother will now wipe her eyes. She will now know that you are not dead. Do people say you have brought the first vehicles here? Where will they now hide? Will they now bury their heads in shame? Who among the boys of this village would have brought vehicles here? You, you are true to your name. Ntube means, pioneer – initiator of things to come. Daughter-of-the-upstream-python, welcome. Let a rat not pass-by where you sleep."

Ntube gave an arcane smile and cut the conversation short by telling the woman that she wanted to greet other people. On her way downvillage, she asked children to borrow chairs from the chief and take them to the visitors. The children met with the visitors on the way and told them that they had been asked to give them chairs.

Mr. Ndzerem pondered over the idea of dividing the crowd. He advised that the vehicles be driven to the place of the feast and be kept there till after the feast in the evening. He thought in that way, they would easily make friends with the villagers under the influence of the vehicles. And so, the vehicles were driven to the chief's compound, close to where the feast was taking place.

Mr. Nsahbinla then asked the chief for a room in which to put the things in the MAN Diesel truck. After young men had packed the things in the room, the vehicle left for Kumbo Quarters to bring the bull which he had sent for from Muabi. The bull caused quite a stare in the place. Many people said they had never seen such a bull before.

People of neighbouring villages who attended the feast thought the bull was for the feast and wanted it killed for that purpose. When they were told it was for Ntube's bride price, a dispute ensued. *Sango* Achebe had eaten the ritual cows of other people's death ceremonies. It was time for his people to pay back. "No doubt he became a Christain to deprive us of our cow!" one person exclaimed

The wrangling went on for some time till the arrival of *Sango* Nyamempango shifted their attention to something else. He had heard of the death of his friend and had come to eulogise him on the drum and to perform acrobatic dancing for the spirits. He drummed, as he had never done before. He drummed all the praise and code names of the deceased.

The drumming echoed far and wide.

Kilente, kilente, kilente,

My ears are awe-stricken.

I hear the deities in battle,

Making war with their guards.

Kilente, kilente, kilente,

He who struck the crest of Kupe,

And vented the flaming thunder,

He who hosted Bakossi deities,

And stopped the raging storms,

The guard of the gates of Muanenguba,

Is no more, is no more, is no more.

Tegede, tegede, tegede is no more

The deities have sealed the sun,

And left the world in darkness,

The sun of Asome-Ngoe is lost in the clouds,

Tegede, tegede, tegede is no more.

You who maned Bakossi shadows,
And gave them the claws of tigers,
Are you gone like an unnamed child,
Are you lost like spittle in a stream?

You roared in uninhabited lands,
Representing Muankum, the deity,
You instilled fear in foreigners,
Till the church unmasked you,
Are you now gone like morning dew?
Are you now planted like a boundary post?

Kupe fumes with rage,
Muanenguba boils with remorse,
The seal of pollution has succumbed to pollution,
The land has lost its daring wit.
Kilente, kilente, kilente,
Tegede, tegede, tegede is no more.

The attendants nodded in approval and women ululated
and sang the praises of the drummer.

He's crying and wailing for his friend,
He's crying and wailing for his friend,
He's crying and wailing for his friend, o!

The throng of young men who had carried *Sango* Nyamempango's cartons of second hand clothing that he received as payment for treating his patients, soon brought in other drums. The touring herbalist tried each drum and set it on the right tone. After demonstrating the beat of each accompaniment, he skipped into the circle and intoned his famous song.

Solo: *Abayibo bayibo tabingoma, abayibo,*

Chorus: *Abayibo,*

Solo: *Abayibo, bayibo tabingoma, abayibo.*

Chorus: *Abayibo.*

In the dance that followed, *Sango* Nyamempango held people spellbound until midnight when Mr. Nsahbinla suddenly remembered that it was not *abieg* that brought them to Atieg. He called Mr. Ndzerem and told him the proverb, "Once bitten twice shy, but twice bitten, forever beaten." We are playing into the hands of these people again. Let's tell the chief to assemble his people and we move down to my mother in-law's place. We have to put this thing behind our backs. Mr. Ndzerem dutifully told the chief. He in turn, called Emade, Ahone, and Ewang-Ename and those concerned with the marriage problem and they all left for Emade's compound.

On arrival, the chief told Mr. Ndzerem and his entourage that they, the natives had discussed the Ntube affair and all that remained was the payment of what Ewang-Ename had spent on the girl. If Mr. Nsahbinla had all the money he could pay. If he had part, he could make part payment.

Mr. Nsahbinla felt really happy and confident. Stars swirled before his eyes. He gazed tenderly at Ntube. Their eyes met in the fleeting light of the bush lamp.

"How much does our friend Ewang-Ename say he spent?" Mr. Ndzerem asked.

"I hear he says £150 but if *Nyango* Emade and her sister have something to say, they can do so before we take a decision."

Eyes turned to Emade. She remained uncommitted. At last Ejolle cut in. "If Mr. Nsahbinla really wants to marry Ntube without leaving bitter feelings behind, he should give *Mue* Ewang-Ename £200. *Mue* cannot take anything less with a peaceful heart. One cannot take care of a girl from

childhood, with thorns devastating his soles as he traps to feed her, and when the time of harvest comes, some one else comes with the insignia of education and carries her away.”

Ejolle's demand jolted Ntube from her seat but before she burst out in anger, Mr. Ndzerem the spokesman for the visitors said he would accept what Ejolle had said. He handed over the money to the chief who in turn handed it to Ejolle. Mr. Ndzerem was then asked to give Emade £25, Ahone £10 and a sitting allowance of £5 to all those present. When all the payment was done, Ntube was declared Mr. Nsahbinla's wife. The people ululated and did shuttle runs with the couple. Then they moved up to the chief's place and killed the cow and distributed its meat even to people who remained behind to listen and dance to Nyamempango's music.

At dawn, Ntube prepared pepper soup for the visitors. At 8.30, Mr. Ndzerem on behalf of the visitors thanked the Atieg people for their hospitality and bade them good- bye.

Chapter Sixteen

Before the four vehicles set out, curious children were waiting by the river to see how vehicles crossed a river without a bridge. The truck tore through the Brook-of-the-serpent again making a mess of it. In fact, with that fourth passage, the brook ceased to be. The children roared with excitement as they saw the miracle of four-wheel-drive vehicles lay waste a place that had haunted them from childhood. Ntube stared contemptuously at what was once the Brook-of-the-serpent (where she had once fallen) and laughed hysterically.

When the vehicles got to the big field, the Nsahbinlas parted company with Mr. Ndzerem. They returned to Kumba while he proceeded to Upper Bakossi to inspect the new farm-to-market-road bridges that had been constructed. On arrival at Ekangteh he was delighted to see Mr. Nnahbie, a former Sasse College classmate.

“*A muan-e-Nkose*,” Mr. Ndzerem addressed his friend. “What are you doing here? Is this your village?”

“*A muan-e-Nchong*,” Mr. Nnahbie responded in their school-day jokes, and embraced him. What has brought you to my village?”

“Man, it’s a pleasure to see you. I have not seen you for ages. What happened? What have you been doing with yourself ever since you left Sasse?”

“Boh, I couldn’t continue after losing my father in form three. I returned to the village to become a farmer. What are we doing outside? Let’s go to the house.” Mr. Nnahbie invited his friend and led the way. “Sit down. Feel at home.”

"Thank you. It's wonderful to be here. I feel so elated. How is everything with you? You are still so meticulous. Everything is well arranged as usual. Fantastic!" Mr. Ndzerem said while admiring Mr. Nnabbies parlour.

"Boh, what can we do? It is only when one dies that he rots. We are trying to survive in the village."

"To be candid, I am amazed with the way you have organized your life. Congratulations."

"What do you say has brought you here? Let me know before you sit down."

"I have come to inspect the newly built farm-to-market bridges in Upper Bakossi. I shall go as far as Mbad. I shall be here for three days."

"That's fine with me and I believe you will give me the honour to be your host at least for today."

"That's OK. I very much want your warmth once more. Do you still sing those funny songs?"

"Let me show you your room before I drive you out of my house. You can't forget the past?" Mr. Nnabbie joked, got up and arranged a room for his friend. "That's your room. If you are tired you can go and rest though I would have liked us to converse now. We may be so busy in the evening that we may not be able to converse."

"What shall we be doing in the evening?"

"My daughter's suitor's parents will come here this evening to pay brideprice on her. If you are not too tired you will be welcomed to witness the event."

"I should say, I am lucky. Before I came here, we had an experience of brideprice payment in Lower Bakossi in a village called Atieg. One of my tribe's boys got married to an Atieg girl."

"Yes, Bakossi is your tribe. You have nothing to fear here. After all, some of your people settled around the Baseng Mission long ago. They feel at home. If you like, I can show you a plot to build here."

“When I next come. Your land is also grassland. So, don’t think you are joking.”

In the evening, Mr. Ndzerem participated in the brideprice giving ceremony. The next day, he thanked his host for his kindness and left to inspect the bridges. Wherever he went, he received gifts of fowls and goats from the natives. After a three day mission he returned to Kumba to tell Mr. Nsahbinla his experience of a brideprice giving ceremony in Upper Bakossi. He met him at the club. Fortunately, there were very few people in the club that day. So, they had ample time to converse.

“When we separated, I drove straight to a place called Ekahngte almost midway to the last bridge in the most northern reaches of Bakossi. At first, I doubted whether I would have good accommodation in a rural area like that. But as God would have it, I bumped into an old classmate. The fellow is well established at home. He took me to his house, and I would say, he heartily welcomed me. By coincidence, I arrived on the evening that his daughter’s suitors were to come and pay brideprice on her. Without minding that I was a stranger in their midst, he dully invited me to participate in the ceremony. I was so keen at the ceremony that I decided to take down notes. It seems to me that Upper Bakossi people adhere to their tradition more scrupulously than Lower Bakossi people. I cannot narrate in detail what I saw and heard because of certain lapses in translation. My friend helped me quite well, but there are certain nuances that are missing.

The occasion started in the early hours of the evening and ended in the early hours of the morning. There was no hurry. Everybody was patient in the observance and execution of even minute traditional rites like divining with cola-nuts.

When the parents of the girl’s suitor arrived, they filed into the house of their would be in-law. They were heartily welcomed and asked to sit down. Presently, the father of

the girl offered them a kola-nut and a gourd of palm wine. The eldest visitor split the kola-nut, meditated for awhile and said,

Kola-nut, where the walking stick leads the blind,
There, he goes. Our walking stick has led us here.
If the path is smooth and harmless, tell us.

He threw the lobes on the ground and studied their position. Before he exclaimed, someone shouted, "*A eeh*," (It says yes) and pointed at the 'judge' – the lobe that faced the odd way out. Four lobes faced downward but one faced upward. The 'judge' was separated from the rest of the lobes. A young man in the host family filled a small gourd with palm wine and placed it by the 'judge'. The father of the girl was then asked to take the two things and ask for the group's blessing. He got the things and raised them thrice and in each occasion, the attendants squirted their blessings on the things. Then the boy shared the wine and some more kola-nuts. As the people ate and drank, they conversed on trivial issues.

Presently, a throng of girls filed in, carrying large gourds of palm wine and assorted things. Two boys led a large boar, one led a ram with curved horns, three others carried cocks and a hen. The children of the host family helped the visitors keep the things at safe places, and led the visiting children to their respective places – the girls to the kitchen and the boys to the parlour where the men were conversing.

The women of the host family had been preparing food. Once they finished, they carried it to the parlour where the girl's father shared it, giving the visitors most of it. The people ate and drank to their fill.

After eating, the host family that had all along feigned ignorance of the purpose of the visit inquired why their friends were visiting. The spokesman of the visitors, one *Sango Ekwelmbwe* stood up and said, "*A mue*, when we came and you offered us a kola-nut, you heard what I said before

I threw it down. I said that our walking stick has led us here. The kola-nut did not gainsay. It approved of our mission. We have seen a good breed of fowls in your compound and we have come that you become the father of our son Belle as you are the father of your daughter Diongue.”

The house fell silent. Then there was murmuring. Finally, the spokesman of the host group called Diongue. She came in with cupped hands sealing her face.

“Don’t cover your face. If you were not to suck, you would not have tickled the breasts,” one of her relatives joked, as her father stepped forward.

“Diongue, these people say they have come here because of you. Did you know they were coming? Do you know them?”

“Yes, papa,” she answered.

“Do you know Belle?”

“Yes, papa.”

“His people have brought wine. Should I drink it?”

“Yes, papa.”

“That is the wine. If you want us to drink it, go and give it to us.”

The girl moved to where the gourd was and touched it and indicated that it be carried to the centre of the hall.

“They have brought other gifts for us, if we should take them, give them to us.”

“Here they are, papa,” she said as she moved to her suitor’s people, got two cocks and a hen and gave them to her father.

Diongue’s father pointed at the things and told his elder brother *Sango* Sone-Ebong to accept them on behalf of the family. *Sango* Sone-Ebong took the things and placed them by the gourd of palm wine. Then he got the bigger cock by the legs and lashed the girl with it all over the body. After that, he gave it to one of the hosts’ boys to kill and roast.

While the boy roasted the cock, *Sango* Sone-Ebong poured libation. He got a low stool and sat astride – the gourd between his legs. He rubbed his hands on the gourd, took off the 'leaf-cork', and raised it. The attendants squirted their blessings on the 'leaf-cork'. Then he prayed;

Oh! Wine, we have assembled here this evening,
To carry out the rite of marriage which our
Ancestors themselves handed over to us.
As we pour this libation, we implore them
To guide us in this endeavour
So that when the up is fine, the down too
Should be fine. We want to make friends
Not enemies. We want to build, not to scatter,
That when a barn is empty, it can be replenished.

So, we intercede with Ngoe the founder of Bakossi,
His sons, Asomengoe, Ngelngoe, Menamengoe, Anongoe
Mbongoe, Abongoe, Mekundangoe, Kaahngoe,
To come and assist us in these matters.

Let them be led into this compound by our ancestors,
Etame-Ngole, Palle-Nnange, Ebane-Mejang, and all
others. Those whose names we have forgotten should not
take offence. But should come to share the blessing of this
occasion with us.

Let the men when coming, carry boxes of money and
Meat. Let their wives carry baskets of children and Food
and distribute them to us, so that the land may overflow
with the good things of life,

If for anything sake an enemy crops up,
With the intent to destroy what we are building,
Let him come when others are returning,
Or return, when others are coming.

Let the fowls of our land hatch seven young ones,
Four cocks and three hens.
That three cocks be meant for food,
And one to procreate with the hens.

Let our land be as prosperous as they left it,
That where a fowl perches, a kite should not know,
That an enemy's stone should become a lump of mud.
That when an enemy throws us on coarse and spiculate
Grass we may land on soft grass.
Let the Up be fine that the Down should be fine too.

He raised the 'leaf-cork' and the attendants squirted blessings on it once more. After the prayer, the old man filled a small gourd with palm wine (spilling a lot of the wine in the process) and told the men who had been given kola-nuts (brought by the visitors) to throw them on the ground. There were three. After each throw, a judge was taken. Then the three judges were thrown for the judge of consensus to be selected. With that, Diongue was invited once more. She stood in the middle of the house facing her father.

"Diongue," he addressed her. "Nobody begets children and declares that he loves some and hates others. I would have long done so on you. I would have loved you to be a boy, a son to inherit my property. But once you came out a woman, I knew you belonged to another kinsgroup. Take therefore the blessing of this kinsgroup to wherever you are going. Be a mother of a series of twins that your roots may make it impossible for another woman to find comfort in your husband".

He bent down, got the gourd and the kola-nut, sipped a bit of the palm wine and spewed it on his daughter's chest. Then he raised the wine and the Kola-nut twice, and in

each case, the attendants squirted their blessings on the things. He stretched out his hands to hand the things to the girl. In taking them, Diongue placed her hands on her father's head and rolled them down to his shoulders, to the arms, and finally to the hands and got the things. She nibbled the kola-nut, sipped a bit of the palm wine and after swallowing, went and gave her suitor's father the cola-nut and the palm wine. He ate all of the kola-nut and drank all of the wine and handed back the empty gourd to the girl. Diongue took it and handed it to her father. He took Diongue's right hand and the gourd and raised them once more and the attendants squirted their blessings on the girl.

A boy called Epoge was then asked to share the rest of the palm wine. Presently, the boy who was roasting the cock brought it. The gizzard was cut into two halves, one half was given to Diongue's father and the other to Belle's father. The breast was also cut into two and one half was given to the eldest visitor, and the other to the eldest host. The rest of the fowl was chopped up and each attendant had a tiny piece to eat.

Each person in the house took the oath of marriage by eating of the cock. After that, the two kinsgroups debated the brideprice. Belle's people gave what they had and pledged to pay the rest in due course. In taking away their wife, they sang songs of victory."

Chapter Seventeen

Nyamempango had eulogised his late colleague on the drum for two days. In the afternoon of the third day, he decided to return to Ngomboku, his village. He took the path of the Brook-of-the-serpent. On reaching the brook, he could not recognise the place. It had been ransacked. He moved back and brought the chief of Atieg and other dignitaries to the place to find out who had destroyed the Brook-of-the-serpent.

“Chief,” he addressed the chief. “Have you been down here since the death of *Mue Akwe*?”

“No, the hammock is in good repair and all the people take the road of the hammock.”

“OK, come, come and see,” he said and led the way. “This tribe is dead. The guard of the gates of Kupe and Muanenguba is dead and dead with the tribe,” Nyamempango said, shaking his head, shrugging his shoulders, and dramatising with other gestures.

“Chief, what has done this? Do you know what you have done to this tribe? Who has ploughed the Brook-of-the-serpent out of existence?

“Is this what those lorries did down here?” the chief asked rather light-heartedly.

“What lorries? Who brought them? Where did they come from? Let me tell you, the person who brought those lorries, has killed not only the Mbuogmut clan but also the whole of Bakossi tribe. See, here, I think, stood the hut of skulls. It is no more. Here, I think, stood the plant of peace. It is no more. Here, I think, the white man’s foot was buried.

The place is no more. Here, I think, the Brook rose. It is no more. Where is the abode of the serpent now? Where is the pot of poison?"

The chief and elders were confounded with what they saw. The hut, the pot of charms and garden of herbs were irretrievably buried in mud. Nyamempango suddenly made pale by that decrepit situation, raised his hands and shouted. His voice echoed in the hills and he sank to the ground. The chief and his people carried him from the spot and after fanning him for some time, he recovered and returned to his village.

Chapter Eighteen

Mr. Nsahbinla had spent a lot of money on his trip to Atieg. Though he thought of the church wedding, he thought he could not shoulder it immediately considering that he had ordered for a car that would need clearing from the port. Rev. Father Joe had fallen sick and had gone on leave rather abruptly. As such, there was no hurry for the church wedding anymore. Furthermore, Ntube was having intermittent bouts of vomiting and was indisposed most of the time.

Three months after the Atieg trip, the Nsahbinlas got their car – a white Opel. While they were celebrating the arrival of the car, Ntube collapsed during a bout of vomiting. She was rushed to hospital in Kumba and for three weeks Dr. Davis followed her up closely. On the day he thought of discharging her, he discovered that her legs were swollen. He ordered for a series of tests. But since the tests could only be done in Victoria, he asked Mr. Nsahbinla to carry her there.

“Young man,” Dr. Debo of the One-Mile Hospital Victoria, called Mr. Nsahbinla, “your wife needs an immediate operation to save her life. She has begun having blood poisoning. So, look for people to donate blood for her. I shall operate her very early tomorrow morning.”

Mr. Nsahbinla was chilled to the marrow. His eyes bulged. He whimpered and sulked.

He peered at the Doctor. Dr. Debo got up from his seat with the calmness of a mantis. He looked at the embarrassed Nsahbinla and said, “Mr. we can’t leave a dead foetus in your wife. It will kill her”.

Sweat, boiling hot, sprouted on Mr. Nsahbinla's face and trickled down. He drew his nose twice and asked rather sheepishly, "Dr. is there nothing we can do to save the child?"

"What child?" the Doctor snapped.

Mr. Nsahbinla drove to Buea and out of the 26 Nso people he contacted to donate blood, only his cousin offered to. They drove back to Victoria and his cousin donated the blood.

The next morning, Dr. Debo performed the operation. Ntube was in hospital for three weeks. When she was discharged Mr. Nsahbinla drove her back to Kumba in their Opel car. It was a very painful journey. Ntube's face twitched uncontrollably from spasms of sobs as the car glided along the newly tarred though very narrow road. For two weeks the couple mourned for their lost baby. The Ndzerems were particularly sympathetic. They did all they could to soothe them, but Ntube showed no sign of emerging from her grief. At last, Mr. Ndzerem went to Buea and arranged for a transfer for the Nsahbinlas.

True to prediction, Ntube's condition improved fast in Buea. Within two months, she built back her youthful provocative flesh. To make sure they kept to the Doctor's advice, Mr. Nsahbinla moved room. Ntube hardly moved out of her house. Only the houseboy went to the market. One day she accompanied him to buy meat. All hell broke loose. Though casually dressed, she caught the admiration of many a man. And soon, the Secretaries of State and other dignitaries of Buea were combing Buea to have a glimpse of the fairy that was the talk of the day.

Ntube's mother-in-law came in from Banso on a Tuesday afternoon. Ntube tried to phone Mr. Nsahbinla to no avail. So she decided to meet him in the office. As she hopped on stones at the sidewalk, a car pulled up.

"Miss," the driver called.

Ntube paid no attention and continued her hopping.

"Miss," the driver called again, and moved the vehicle to the curb.

Ntube turned and saw the driver. "Are you talking to me?" she inquired.

"Yes. Can I give you a lift?" the driver demanded.

"No, I am just going to Education, there. I have already arrived," Ntube said and pointed at the building a couple of yards away.

"Come in girly," an elderly voice invited from the back seat. Ntube peeped and saw the Private Secretary to the Prime Minister. He lowered the glass and sent out his head.

"Come in, girly," he invited again.

"No, I have reached where I am going," Ntube countered.

"OK, tell me where I shall meet you in the evening."

"I don't go out in the evenings. Buea is cold and I am not well."

"Buea is not cold in a car. I want us to stroll to Victoria. If you are not free today, let's say tomorrow?"

"I am married."

"Who to?"

"Mr. Nsahbinla, the E.O. from Kumba,"

The Private Secretary to the P.M. felt droplets of perspiration all over his body. He had read thousands of letters protesting against the appointment of Mr. Nsahbinla as Education Officer in Kumba. He had been asked to make suggestions about him. He had thought of transferring him to another Department. His brains cranked. An idea came up to him. The list of people recommended for emergency courses at Glasgow was still lying on his desk. "I shall include that fellow's name on the list and ... Yes, for two years. He'll be there for two years. He will be happy to go abroad," the Private Secretary said to himself and bid Ntube good bye. The next day he included Mr. Nsahbinla's name on the list and forwarded it to the Prime Minister's desk. It was rejected on grounds that Mr. Nsahbinla hadn't the qualification to do a diploma in Education. The Private Secretary then did an exchange. He swapped Mr. Ndikum with Mr. Nsahbinla – Mr. Ndikum, to do Education and

Mr. Nsahbinla to do Local Government. It worked, and in two months, Mr. Nsahbinla and other Bamenda sons and daughters left to do further studies in Universities in Britain.

Immediately Mr. Nsahbinla left, Ntube left for Kumba to live with the Ndzerems. The Private Secretary unleashed a frantic hunt for her. For three months, he combed all the nooks and cranny of Buea. Chengwa his driver, was assigned to move from market to market to look for Ntube. At last he heard that she had moved to Kumba. The P.S.P.M. despatched him at once to trace her. He traced her at the Ndzerems and told her that the P.S.P.M. wanted to help her secure a job with the Secretariat of Agriculture, and as such, wanted her to return to Buea. Ntube complained of her health and said she could not return to Buea.

Chengwa returned to Buea with a heavy heart because he feared his master would blame him for not putting the matter in the right manner. However, when he told him what Ntube had said, he decided to go to Kumba himself. He was lucky. He met Ntube alone. He tried to convince her that the job did not require strain. Yet, Ntube turned it down.

“Madam, I am convinced that you are not aware of what I have done for you and your husband. I sent him abroad on your behalf. Now I want to offer you a job. This should convince you that I mean you no harm. But it seems to me as if you are deaf and blind to what I am doing and what I intend to do for you. There are other girls worrying me for what you are turning down. Can you repay me for what I have done for you so far?”

“Sir, I am very thankful to you but my health cannot permit me to work in Buea. Furthermore, where shall I live? What will my husband think of me? So, you see my predicament?”

“I understand. But your husband will be over there for two years. When you feel like it, contact me. I’ll do all to keep you happy. OK? Good bye!”

Chapter Nineteen

Mr. Nsahbinla returned to Southern Cameroon after two years of intensive training in Local Government. He was highly acclaimed for hard work and initiative. Before his return, his cousin who had been the Secretary of State for Education had been made the Secretary of State for Local Government. To compensate Mr. Nsahbinla for his brilliance, the new S.S.L.G. appointed him the Assistant Divisional Officer of Victoria.

Ntube was in the full glow of her former self. Her painful physical and emotional experiences of the operation had blurred with time and she was now ready to receive her husband without restraint. She had gone through all medical procedures to ascertain that all was well with her. Dr. Debo had assured her that she was fit.

For six months, they glued themselves together. Yet, Ntube remained as mossless as a rolling stone. Mr. Nsahbinla started losing patience. He started being melancholic. One day, he sat in the club and started talking to himself. Francis, one of the hands of the club rushed to him and inquired whether he needed help. He told him his problem and added that he wanted a way out.

“If you say modern medicine has failed, why don’t you try Papa Moni of Muea? That is where women with gynaecological problems go. I can go and book an appointment with him for you. If you go there without an appointment you may not see him. He is too busy.”

“Francis, here is money. Go right away. Tell him I shall be there tomorrow at four.”

The next day, Ntube and her husband set out for Muea. Pa Moni had cancelled all other appointments that evening. When the ADO arrived, he took him and his wife straight to his consultation room. He divined for them. He told them that Ntube had a problem that would be better solved by a Bakossi traditional doctor. He sent them to one Pa Etame of Mutengene. When they got there, Pa Etame divined for them and advised them to return to the village and perform sacrifices. He said Ntube had serious problems with her village. Once the problems were solved, her problems would be over.

The couple heard piecing sounds in their ears. The room whirled with them. Stars swirled in their eyes. The past, present and future seemed to have been welded into a messy lump. Their hearts pounded their chests. Ntube's temperature rose. She shivered and shuddered uncontrollably and slumped to the ground. Mr. Nsahbinla rushed to her and helped her up.

When they got to Victoria, Mr. Nsahbinla proposed that she should return to Atieg to appease Emade and any other person who could be behind their mishaps. He gave her £100 and bought assorted things for her mother.

"Darling, do whatever the people want. Appease your mother. Let her break the curse. I think, we did not insist on it. We took things for granted. So, this time, everything should be done to make her neutralise the curse. Money should not be the problem. So, go. I am behind. Whenever you want me, I shall be there."

Ntube gazed at her husband and as tears welled up in her eyes, she made a wry face and fell into his arms. He patted her on the back, soothed her, and bade her farewell.

Chapter Twenty

Ntube got to Atieg five days before the Ngomboku market day. She went straight to Ekenzu to see her aunt Ahone. She related her plight to her. She said she had had a miscarriage and a Caesarean stillbirth that nearly took her life. That by the time her husband returned from Europe, she was well enough to have a baby but that for almost two years, there were no signs of her having one. Upon investigation, traditional doctors told her that her family was the main cause of her problems. She therefore came to see her mother to break the curse and bless her.

Ahone listened attentively. She knew it was a serious matter. It required ritual cleansing. That of course required a goat and some fowls. She called her husband and asked Ntube to repeat the story. Her husband too confirmed that it was a very serious matter. He offered to give Ntube a ram for the ritual. The cleansing had to be done at dawn on the Ngomboku market day.

“*Neh* Ahone,” while we are preparing for the occasion, we should send for *Sango* Nyamempango. The traditional doctor said he should be there.”

“If I did not misunderstand *Nyango* Esung, that man may not be at home. It seems he has gone to Ediengo. If the presence of a herbalist is necessary, then we shall send for *Sango* Kape. He is the man to turn to in gynaecological problems.”

In the evening, Ntube and Ahone went down to Atieg. Ahone narrated Ntube’s plight to her sister Emade, and expressed her desire for a reconciliation and neutralization of the curse.

"Daughter-of-the-deities-of-Kupe-Muanenguba, I once told you that when the inside throws out, the outside picks. There may be people still exploiting the situation you created. On the day of the giving of the brideprice you were not very bright. Something was still gnawing at your heart. You should know that, if the scar hurts, then the wound has not healed. So, we have to declare that our scar does no longer hurt. You will cleanse the daughter-of-the-upstream-python on the Ngomboku market day, the day you inflicted the curse. Let all the ancestral spirits bear witness to your genuine act of purifying your daughter."

"As you say, mother-of-the-sugarcane-grove. I shall cleanse the daughter-of-the-upstream-python. I shall cleanse my mother. I shall cleanse the 'Tikila of Tombel. I shall cleanse the twilight for whom men stubbed their feet. I shall ...c l e a n s e yeeee," Emade burst into crying.

"You see, you are spoiling what you want to do. Are you now crying because you have accepted to cleanse the daughter-of-the-upstream-python?"

"It is because of the scar. The scar on me, on my mother, on everything. The scar."

"Stop crying then. We have to rub that scar out. And once that is done, Ntube will be whole."

The next day, Ahone and Ntube went to Elahse to see *Sango Kape*. He understood their plight. He had heard about the curse and was ready to assist in cleansing it. He gave them a list of things to look for. To assure them that he would come, he gave them his bag of herbs and barks of trees to carry to Atieg.

On the Ngomboku market day, Emade, Ahone and Ntube woke up very early. Emade held Ntube by the hand and led her upvillage right up to Ewang-Ename's compound. Ntube was bare-body. As they moved, Emade declared:

Let those asleep wake up. Let all hear this,
Nobody builds and destroys at the same time.
She who destroys can rebuild.

Today, I am rebuilding Ntube-*me-Maddione*
Daughter-of-the-upstream-python.
Whom I destroyed some years back.
Today, I am rebuilding her.
I here plead with those who assisted me in destroying her,
To join me now, in rebuilding her.

Forgive her, as I have forgiven her.
When a finger touches faeces, it is not cut.
It is washed and restored to its former glory.

Let the whole of this village and the Mbuogmut clan,
And the clans of Asomengoe vomit my daughter.
When the inside gives and the outside takes,
The outside should return when the inside demands.

Let the ancestral spirits that executed my curse,
Dismantle it and restore my mother to her former glory,
Let nobody bear her a grudge. She does not bear one
Against anybody.

As they moved along, Emade picked herbs on both sides of the road. On their way downvillage, she did the same thing. When they reached her end of the village, she spread the herbs on the road. The people of the hinterland who were going to the market and the people of Atieg who attended the ceremony, trampled the herbs. Ntube sat on a low stool facing her mother's hut.

Sango Kape came when a crowd had already formed around Ntube. The sun had just broken loose from the horizon. Emade jumped to where Ntube sat and placing her hands on Ntube's head said,

Ntube-*me-madione*, Daughter-of-the-upstream-python,
I was angry with you and cursed you.
Today, the anger has ended. The curse too is ended.

If I am your mother, if I bore you in my womb,
If I bore the pains of birth, be well. Be well.
Be restored to your former glory, that I may be well.
Be well, when the stomach is hurt, the entrails are hurt.
Let the spirits accompanying people to the market,
Bear witness and participate in curing you.
Let them give you what they give to other girls.
Let the sun shine on you and bring you warmth.

If there is a malevolent spirit that refuses to comply,
Let it be blinded by the glow of the sun.
Let it be stricken with leprosy.
Be well, daughter-of-the-upstream-python.

Emade squirted spittle on Ntube's chest, forehead and abdomen. Then she raised her hands and the attendants spewed their blessing at Ntube. The women ululated.

Sango Kape moved forward and looked at the herbs Emade had spread on the road. As expected, they were heavily trampled on by the big crowd. He gathered the herbs, and put them in a bowl of water. That done, he killed the ram and diluted its blood with the herbs. Then he bathed Ntube with the solution. The women ululated and danced and sang birth songs. Ntube was born again. *Sango* Kape butchered the ram and had it prepared with plantains. He called Ewang-Ename and Ejolle and asked them to lead the Atieg people in the manifestation of goodwill by eating of the ram of sacrifice. All the attendants ate of the ram and praised Emade and Ahone for the cleansing. *Sango* Kape then killed one of the cocks and prepared a concoction of herbs and barks of trees with it and gave it to Ntube to eat for eight days.

The elderly women of Atieg too prepared a concoction of herbs and smeared Ntube with it. All the newly married women were also smeared with it. The recipients were advised to stay for three days without bathing.

After the cleansing, Ntube gave *Sango* Kape £2, two cocks and a piece of cloth, and he returned.

The news of the cleansing had spread and people were eager to see Ntube and her mother cuddle each other again. On Good Friday, they went to church. Ntube shied from going to sit close to her godmother. She sat far behind. After Mass, she picked up courage and went and greeted her godmother.

“Maria!” her godmother exclaimed. “Mami, daughter-of-the-upstream-python that gulps water at the water source to control floods, that sends a wry smile on sunshine and rain, that is multicoloured with a curving back and stomach, mother, you are welcome.”

Ntube did not hear the full recitation of her praise name. She was seized by spasms of guilt and convulsed in her godmother’s embrace.

“Mother, forgive me. Everybody should forgive me. I have caused many people great sorrow. I have caused myself great sorrow. So, let everybody forgive me.” She cried.

“Do not cry, daughter-of-the-upstream-python,” her godmother pleaded. This is the time for reconciliation. I forgive you. I shall offer Mass for you. I thank God that you have reconciled with your mother and that she has defused the curse. You have finished with tradition. You should now devote yourself to the Lord your God. You should arrange for church wedding.”

“Thank you, mother. Never forget me in prayers.” Ntube responded.

Ntube stayed at Atieg with Emade for two weeks to cement the new-found love between them. Time and again, Ahone visited them and they had memorable times together.

Chapter Twenty One

Ntube returned to Victoria full of hopes. Mr. Nsahbinla sensed that she was very satisfied with what had been done. His primary aim on her then was for him to seal her periods for nine months. Ntube gave her approval and in two months they succeeded. In the fifth month, Ntube went through agonising spitting and vomiting bouts. Dr. Debo recommended total bed rest and advised that she be rushed to hospital immediately she felt abnormal.

One evening, at almost full term, Ntube told Mr. Nsahbinla to take her to the hospital. She said she was having a movement toward her chest and something seemed to be blocking her chest. When they arrived, the Nursing Sister phoned the Doctor. He came promptly and diagnosed the problem as reversed contractions. He gave her medication to correct the problem but by midnight, things got worse. He conferred with the Nursing Sister and they took the decision to operate to save the lives of mother and child.

Mr. Nsahbinla whirled with pain. “Again?” he asked, and shuddered.

Ntube’s condition worsened. She was running short of breath. The Doctor and his staff went to work immediately and presently, a huge, badly fatigued non-screaming baby boy was extracted. The Nursing Sister took him to another room where she worked frantically to resuscitate him while the Doctor and other nurses worked on his mother.

Mr. Nsahbinla remained behind the theatre shivering like a weaverbird.

"He could not make it," the Nursing Sister whispered into the ear of the exhausted Doctor. "Dead of fatigue and intake of birth fluids."

"Keep it to yourself," the Doctor said, as he removed the bloodstained gowns in an adjacent room. That done, he stepped forth to confront a quivering Nsahbinla.

"Doctor, how are they?" he asked.

"Your wife will be fine."

"And the child?"

"Well, he could not make it."

"He could, could not, could not make it."

Mr. Nsahbinla dashed out of the hospital and returned home. Ntube remained in the anaesthetic state till morning. When she regained consciousness, she inquired about the child. Dr. Debo told her the child was at the intensive care unit. But some days later, he could not hide the truth from her any more. He said the child had died of suffocation. Ntube jumped out of bed and bashed herself on the ground undoing some of the stitches. The Doctor had to go back to the theatre to save a bad situation.

Mr. Nsahbinla hardly visited Ntube in the hospital. He walked about with a stoop and brushed aside sympathisers' concern for Ntube's fate. By the time she was discharged he had moved room. Ntube sensed that he despised her.

"Caius," she called him one day. "I have observed with dismay that you despise me even in the presence of sympathisers. You never visited me in hospital. Before I returned, you had moved room. That wasn't bad. But the fact that you treat my room as a leprosy ward makes me think that you are up for something. You send sympathisers to my room with the flick of the finger? I have observed you very keenly and I must be frank with you. If you now think I am of no good, you should think twice. If you did not know, you should know that I sent you to Europe. Today you are exposed to the good things of life and you think

you can brush me aside. Both of us want children; you, through sexual pleasures, and I, through the agony of vomiting, spitting, and the knife. Who suffers more and sacrifices more, only God knows. But let me tell you, avoid back stabbing me. Why you think our misfortune is mine alone is what aches me. So, don't ever think that you will go free from misfortunes by assigning them to me. Both of us are in the cauldron.

Mr. Nsahbinla stood confounded. He stared at Ntube. Their eyes met. None of them blinked. The duel of eyeing lasted for some time. Mr. Nsahbinla surrendered, banged the door and went to the club.

Chapter Twenty Two

Mr. Ndzerem, was on mission when Ntube was operated. So, his wife could not go to Victoria to visit her. On his return, she asked him to visit Ntube. She proposed that if she could withstand the journey, Mr. Ndzerem should bring her to Kumba, where she would spend some time with her to rebuild herself. Mr. Ndzerem left at once for Victoria. He met Mr. Nsahbinla in the club and disclosed his mission. Mr. Nsahbinla thanked God for it. The next day, Mr. Ndzerem and Ntube left for Kumba. After three months of good care, Ntube hit the pinnacle of beauty once more. But Mr. Nsahbinla was nonchalant about beauty. The ember of love had smouldered away in him. Ntube realised that he was playing a cat and mouse game with her. Whenever he visited her, he tried to coax her to tell him about her claim that she sent him abroad. Ntube refused to do so and even refused to apologise for other utterances.

On his fourth visit, he decided to take her back. On their way, he told her that he thought they had to see the traditional doctor who had advised them to appease her mother. The man would tell them whether the cleansing was well done or not. Ntube nodded with satisfaction and suggested that they go straight to the man.

“Pa Etame, we have come back with our old problem,” Mr. Nsahbinla said.

“Did you go home as I said?”

“Yes. My wife went.”

“Did *Sango* Nyamempango do the purification?”

"No. *Sango* Kape did," Ntube responded.

"Where was *Sango* Nyamempango? Who recommended *Sango* Kape?"

"My aunt," Ntube responded again, this time with a drawn voice.

"*Sango* Kape is a great gynaecologist. But he is not a guard at the gates of Kupe and Muanenguba Mountains. He is not known in the circle of great wizards of the Bakossi tribe. Your mother might have done her best, but I believe your cleansing was partially done."

Mr. Nsahbinla nodded.

"What do we do now?" Ntube asked – her nose running.

"You will have to go back and look for *Sango* Nyamempango. He has to perform the purification. You have no choice."

"Darling, I told you. We have to go back and look for that fellow."

Two weeks after, Mr. Nsahbinla took Ntube to Atieg. Emade welcomed them heartily. But when they told her about their visit, she burst out crying. She sent for Ahone and they started a frantic search for *Sango* Nyamempango. They were told he had gone to Nongomadiba a great distance away.

"Darling, now that we know where he is, and they say it is a great distance away, I shall leave you here to wait for him. Don't mind the price you pay in the search for him. Send two boys to the place and let them bring him at all cost. Because that may take a long time, I shall send you more dresses and other things for you to be comfortable enough to wait for him. Don't hurry over the purification anymore."

Ntube gave him the list of things she needed and after a warm kiss, Mr. Nsahbinla returned to Victoria.

Chapter Twenty Three

The children sent to look for *Sango* Nyamempango were lucky. They met with him at Nyandong on his way back to Ngomboku. They told him that a certain woman from Victoria wanted to see him urgently. He told them he had sensed it, and that was why he was hurrying home. When they got to Atieg, Ntube told him her problem in the presence of Emade and Ahone. *Sango* Nyamempango listened attentively. He however said nothing but promised to see Ntube and her mother the next morning.

Very early in the morning, he met them. "Mother," he addressed Ntube. "I am now ready to listen to you. Last night I was very tired. I could not speak. Now I can listen and if the ancestors tell me anything to tell you, I shall do so."

Ntube repeated her story and pleaded that she was ready to do all in her power to appease the ancestral spirits that were still angry with her.

"Mother," he addressed Ntube. "Do you say you brought those lorries?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what they have done to this village and to the whole tribe?"

"No."

"Know therefore, that those lorries have destroyed the shrine of Asomengoe. It was at the Brook-of-the-serpent that the Bakossi land was divided into clans. Mbuogmut was sent across the river because his mother begot him alone. Now, your lorries have destroyed and desecrated the navel of the tribe. You talk of purification. Where shall we take water to wash you? The Brook-of-the-serpent is no more.

The hut of skulls is no more. Where shall I take a divining skull? The garden of herbs is no more. Where shall I take herbs to treat you with? You are not sick. Your spirit is caught and imprisoned in Kupe. It has to be released by very powerful witch doctors of Bakossi. The staff of peace is no more. Where shall I take one to officiate with in the act of purification? Let me be candid with you, you have done more harm to this tribe than the church that burnt the artefacts of our ancestral spirits. I shan't be able to cleanse you," *Sango* Nyamempango said, got up and went.

Ntube and Emade cried for six days and six nights. On the seventh day, Ahone got the chief and they went to Ngomboku to see the servant of the gods of Kupe and Muanenguba. They were lucky to meet him. He was about going on tour again. After pleading with him to listen to them Nyamempango decided to cancel his journey and go back to Atieg to attend to Ntube and her mother.

"*A mue*," *Sango* Nyamempango addressed Emade. "The chief and your sister came to my village to urge me to come and see what we can do with your abomination. I will do what I can, but the truth is that you will be unable to shoulder the bills. We shall have to reinstate the Brook-of-the-serpent. It has to flow again. The Atieg people have to go and rearrange the stones of the stepping-stones, which your vehicles scattered all over the place. You have to appease the chiefs and people of Ngomboku and Muambong whom your graffi people disgraced. They have to perform sacrifices at Asongwaa – the shrine your graffi people desecrated. All that requires money, a lot of money. After that, we shall buy lots of things for the ceremony of cleansing.

"Even if the things cost a million pounds, I shall buy," Ntube boasted.

Sango Nyamempango eyed her sideways and murmured something to himself. Then he told her that he would consider her serious only after she had appeased the chiefs.

Ntube made an elaborate ceremony of appeasing the chiefs and people of Ngomboku and Muambong and after that she begged the people of Atieg to re-arrange the stones of the stepping-stones.

To restore the Brook-of-the-serpent also required an elaborate ceremony. *Sango* Nyamempango said he could not do it alone. He needed herbalists from all over Bakossi. To save Ntube from another elaborate ceremony, he decided to combine the restoration of the brook, and the cleansing ceremony. The herbalists would restore the brook in the morning, and when it starts flowing, its water would be used to cleanse Ntube in the evening. Ntube was highly impressed with that co-operation.

“Now, listen to what we need,” *Sango* Nyamempango said, and enumerated the things.

1. The foreleg of every state animal.
2. The hindquarters of a porcupine and that of a rat-mole.
3. The bone of an albino.
4. The lock of hair and complete bone of a white man.
5. Thunder.
6. Electric fish.
7. Water from the male and female lakes of Muangenguba Mountain.
8. The bark of the male tree of Kupe Mountain.
9. Your basket-of-the-child, or your cord-of-the-child.

These are the things we need. Once we have them, the cleansing will be done, and of course, very thoroughly.

Before *Sango* Nyamempango finished enumerating the things, Ntube and Emade were drenched with sweat. They shivered from the premonitory feeling that the things were impossible to get. They scanned the whole world and shook their heads. *Sango* Nyamempango eyed them disdainfully and said, “Don’t think it is impossible to get the things. If you

have money, you have the things. Some people sell them in the Ngomboku market. But don't go asking for them as if they were palm oil. They are unlawful things, and only dealers in them know who sells what."

"Thank you papa," Ntube exhaled with great relief and simpered. "You will buy the things for me yourself."

"Who will buy them for you?" *Sango* Nyamempnago scolded. "Have you ever seen me in a market? Is that why you go defecating at the cross-roads?"

"Papa, I have made a mistake. Please forgive me," Ntube apologised.

"If you really want the things, when you go to Ngomboku market, ask of *Nyangu* Ekenkue. If you see her, tell her your problem. She will arrange for you to have the things if you have money."

"Ngomboku market is four days away. I shall go to Ngomboku before then and enquire about the woman." Emade said.

Two days before the market, Emade went and saw *Nyango* Ekenkue and told her to establish contact with the dealers in the things.

"What is wrong with you? Why do you want those things? From where will you get money to buy those things? OK, I shall arrange for you to get them. You know the tree in the middle of the market. That is where I shall wait for you."

Emade and Ntube got to the market and went straight to the woman. She told them to wait for her and the dealers at the outskirts of the market. Presently, she brought them. The unsmiling business-minded dealers gave Ntube a price list.

1. White man bone, complete £50, half £25, quarter £15.
2. White man locks of hair, down £10, chin £5, head £2.
3. Albino bone, complete £15, half £10, quarter £5.
4. Thunder £5.

5. Electric fish £5.
 6. Water; male lake £3, female lake £2
 7. Bark of male tree, Kupe £5, Muanenguba £5,
Fako £5
- No Credit, No Price Reduction.
(Management)

Ntube looked at the price list and an eerie sensation overwhelmed her. Her mother saw her wrinkle with disappointment. She withered within a split second.

"I can't buy the things at these prices. I have only got £50 with me. I have to write to my husband to send me more money. By Jove, can he even afford £100? He has already spent so much money on this damned thing. He is paying the car loan, and so on and so on."

"Let's buy what we can buy now, and buy the rest when he sends money," Emade advised.

"No," Ntube grinned. "I'll better buy all the things and be sure, than buy half in doubts. The forelegs and hindquarters of state animals may also pose problems. So, before I send people to Ekep, Mbambe and Bangone for the parts of the animals, I should be sure I can buy the most difficult things. Madam Ekenkue, tell your people that I cannot buy the things now. I shall buy them only when my husband sends me money. I am very sorry. I did not know the things were so expensive."

"Okay," the dealers echoed in unison and departed.

Ntube and Emade left the place completely devastated. They moved in the market with no marrow in them.

Chapter Twenty Four

Emade and Ntube were just about going back when they heard a voice from behind. Ntube turned and saw her husband's driver. "John!" she shouted, and embraced him. "Where are you from?"

"From Victoria. Master send me to give you things. I pass here about one hour ago. I reach Atieg and they tell me you have come to the market. So, I get some boys. They carry the things and they put them outside. So let me go and leave you so that you put them in the house."

Ntube, Emade and the driver got into the vehicle and drove to the big field. From there, they trekked to Atieg. On arrival, Ntube saw more things than she had expected. Anyway, her interest was to let the driver go. So, she got a piece of paper and tried to write.

"Do not write him Madam. He will not read the letter. He say I tell you that he do not want you again. As you see, he has send all your things. He has change his house. He marry a Nso girl in the church last week," the driver said, dashed off and feigned deafness to Ntube's calls.

As the driver disappeared, Ntube stood transfixed. She did not yell. She did not tremble. She just stood with a paralysed memory. When she recovered from the shock, she looked all around, the way an epileptic does when recovering from a fit. Emade had put all the things in the hut but for the Vono bed. Ntube looked at the void of life around her. She yelled, and yelled again, her knees buckled and she fell down crying and rolling on the ground in spite of her beautiful dress. Emade rushed to her and inquired what was wrong.

"Caius Nsahbinla has divorced me."

"What?" Emade asked and yelled, and yelled again. Her voice sank with every yell. Her knees buckled. She sank to the ground, rolled and twitched, stretched and stiffened out.

The people who were drawn to the scene concentrated their attention on Ntube. Emade had been notorious for wallowing and crying and feigning death. They held Ntube and tried to calm her down. For two hours she cried. For two hours Emade remained unattended to. By the time somebody thought of her, she had stiffened. The women carried her behind the house to try to resuscitate her. Their attempts failed. She had long been dead.

The pandemonium that broke out from behind the hut brought people from afar. The people who saw Emade and Ntube in the market were shocked to hear that Emade was dead. Ntube got the news of her mother's death when the crying of other women died down. Like most people, she thought her mother was in a state of shock. But when she saw the corpse, she leapt into the air and crashed onto the ground. Children were at once dispatched to the market to bring the Atieg villagers who had gone to the market.

As the news spread, there was a stampede. John Akenji, the driver who had brought the news of the divorce tried to find out what was wrong. He was told that Ntube's mother had died of shock. With that, he thought his life was in danger. So, he abandoned the palm wine he was drinking, entered the vehicle and drove off.

Immediately he arrived Victoria, he told Mr. Nsahbinla that Ntube's mother died of shock on hearing the news of the divorce. He pouted and said it served her right.

Ahone who had returned to Ekenzu to arrange her things before the ceremony of cleansing, was sent for. When she arrived at Atieg, she saw Ntube pinned down by six women.

"Leave her. Will crying and bashing herself on the ground bury her mother for her? Is that not what she wanted?" Ahone asked and held Ntube. The women left her. Ahone looked at her straight in the face and said, "I hear your

mother is dead because your husband has divorced you. She nearly died when he married you. So, at both ends, she was at the mouth of death. Be composed. This place will soon be full of people. It is not crying that they will evaluate. It is how you bury your mother in spite of the difficulties you are facing. Don't bury your mother like a dog and create an indelible stigma that will give that graffi boy room to jeer at you. Listen, we have to send for a coffin, blankets, and burial dress from Tombel. We have to feed those who will keep the vigil with us. We have to prepare for Kad. So, we can't afford to cry now."

Ntube got up and pulled herself together. She formed committees to handle different aspects of the burial. She sent somebody to Tombel for blankets, coffin and so on. Mr. Okore, Wobe's husband chose expensive news-making things for the burial and took them to Atieg himself.

"That woman did not like me," Mr. Okore said, when he brought the things. "But she was a nice woman. Because Bakossi people are stupid, they thought she was foolish. It was the man in her that worried her. She was a great woman. Now that she cannot reject me, I shall give her a befitting burial. Here are the things you sent for. And here are those I have brought on behalf of my wife (who will soon come) and myself".

Ntube and Ahone were very thankful and the attendant women ululated. After burial, the clans were lavishly entertained and both Ahone and Ntube were highly praised.

On the day of the *ahieg*, Ahone asked Ntube whether she wanted to eulogise her mother. Most people thought she would be unable. But after everything had been arranged, she set out to eulogise.

All that graze far afield,
Feed themselves on juicy grass,
Breed their young in love and peace,
And sing Thy praise, the song of life.

I grazed myself far afield,
On northern grassfield mounts,
And fed myself on coarse grass,
And got the scratch, scratch of death.

That , a keen knife surely was,
To slash my throat, my mum's the same,
And that, she did in word and deed,
And now to death, we both belong.

But see, to her there is much luck,
Here I bury the daughter of deities,
But who, who will bury that of the upstream-python?
I grazed afar and got my doom.

Although Ntube broke down after the recitation she was
highly praised. Ahone too recited.

I hear my ears humming,
I hear the drums beating,
That she who beat is beaten,
That the world has come to an end.

The male-lady, defier of conventions,
Who braved storms and hooting owls,
Who raised her hands to stop the storm,
And dammed the floods of the land.

The daughter of the deities,
The shade of tradition,
Has gone, has gone for ever,
And left the land with open hands.

Who will weep for this tigress dead?
The pacesetter of Mbuogmut clan,
She held the land by the throat,
Today, she has paid the price.

All the people who attended the *ahieg* praised Ahone and
Ntube for giving Emade a befitting burial.

Chapter Twenty Five

Ntube was given a clean shave on the day of *ahieg*. Two months later, she asked to be shaven again. After three months, she called the same elderly woman to shave her again, but this time, up and down.

“I have never seen a person shave three times for the same death. I have never seen a woman shave down for the loss of a mother. Women shave down when they lose their husbands. I wonder what you are up to.”

“The first time I shaved, I shaved because of the loss of my mother. The second was because of my own death. And this last one is because of the death of my husband. When two rivers meet they merge and become one and nothing can distinguish the merged waters. My death is his, and his is mine. He should not think that I carried this he-goat alone.”

“But I hear he only divorced you. He is not dead. One day, he may ask for reconciliation. He paid brideprice on you. No matter when he dies, you will be obliged to wear sack clothes to mourn for him. You will then be expected to shave down, to forbid you from feeding somebody else with his food till after the removal of the sack clothes.”

“I tell you, as I am dead, so is he too dead. What kills the toad cannot spare the frog.”

The woman shaved Ntube reluctantly. Ntube paid her one shilling six pence for the up, and two shillings for the down.

“This world is pregnant. It will give birth. The children of nowadays are making a pudding of the conventions that held us together. They are putting a wedge between ours

and theirs. Ours, we inherited, theirs, they dream by the roadside and murder us with them," the woman said, and left for her compound.

Ten days after the shaving, Ntube fixed the date for the celebration of her mother's feast. She sent word to all the women associations she belonged to while she was in Kumba and Victoria respectively. To help her cope with the expenditure, each of the associations sent her, the conventional condolence money. On the feast day, only the Bakossi Women's Association of both towns sent representatives. Mrs. Ndzerem sent the donation of the Nso Women's Association through a special representative. When Ntube saw the girl, she was shocked that Mrs. Ndzerem herself did not come.

"Auntie has not come?" she asked almost in tears.

"No. They say a prominent man's wife is dead in Victoria, She went there," the girl answered,

"Which woman died?" Ntube asked with a jerk.

"One big man's wife. He was a DO," the girl responded.

Overtaken by disappointment, Ntube forgot she had a letter the girl brought in her hand. As she moved away from her, the girl saw her drop the letter. She ran and picked it up and gave it to her. In spite of that, Ntube did not read the letter.

"What did I do to those Bansa people? My mother died none of them came to sympathise with me. I know they were celebrating Nsahbinla's wedding. But was auntie's love for me such a fake that she could not come here? What is the use of the money they have sent to me? I shall send it back."

Ahona saw Ntube whimpering and growing unfriendly with the visitor. "Daughter-of-the-upstream-python, what is wrong? Why are you so angry? I have told you that in situations like these, anger does not help. So, calm down."

"You see, I cannot understand that the people I lived with, people who knew my problems, can decide to treat me the way the Bansa community has done. Even if Caus divorces me, I still owe much to the Ndzerems. I am, mm a ..." Ntube burst into crying.

“If they did not put you to heart they would not have sent that girl. So, it may be they have a real problem. Read the letter the girl gave you.

“What am I doing with their letter?”

“Read it.”

Ntube got the letter and tore it with the envelope. On second thought she put the pieces together as in a jigsaw puzzle. Then in the blur of tears she read;

P.W.D. Kumba,

P.M.B. 46 Kumba.

My dear Mary,

We got the news of the death of your mother while at home (Nso) where my husband had lost his aunt. On our return from there, we thought since your mother had been buried, we would come to assist you in a special way, considering your difficult situation now.

This would have been the best occasion for us to come. But unfortunately, it does not rain, but it pours. The news of the death of Mrs. Nsahbinla has completely shattered our plans. You know, your former husband got married to a girl who was expecting his baby. She died in childbirth. We have both gone to Victoria and from there, we shall accompany the corpse home.

We know you are sandwiched between the death of your mother and the loss of your husband. We pray you to take heart. We shall surely come to your assistance. What we have sent now is just to enable you solve some of the problems you have now.

Keep fit, we'll be there.

Love from us,

Veronica and Cletus Ndzerem.

Ahone saw Ntube tremble and exhale noisily. She began reading the letter again, pressing the pieces together as if that would alter the message. She exclaimed and drew a crowd around her.

"They say, the woman who replaced me is dead. Where shall I take money to go to Victoria? What type of bad luck is this?" Ntube asked.

"Do you say you want to go to Victoria? For what?" somebody asked.

"To go and sympathise with Nsahbinla." Ntube responded.

"Because blood flows in your veins and water in his? Is a wife dearer than a mother? Did we see him here when your mother died? What that graffi boy gives you has sugar and salt. Do you know the two of you murdered your mother?"

Ntube got embarrassed at that hostility and went away quietly. At the end of the ceremony, people praised Ahone for good guidance.

Chapter Twenty Six

Although people had scolded her and suggested that she had no obligation to go and sympathise with Mr. Nsahbinla, Ntube left for Victoria the next day. She got there when the corpse had already been taken to Nso. There were a few women in the house tidying up and getting ready to follow the corpse. Ntube had no money to proceed to Nso. She regretted and said if she knew that Mr. Ndzerem's vehicle would have space for her on their return, she would have used the little money she had for a one way trip. The women in the house overheard her. They scoffed and asked her whether she was not satisfied.

"Satisfied with what? Ntube asked.

"With one corpse. Do you want the head of Mr. Nsahbinla too?" one of the women asked in return.

"As I wanted whose?" Ntube asked, rather astonished.

"That of my sister," the woman answered.

"So, you believe I killed her? If so, who killed me?" Ntube asked, lifted her gown and showed the woman two straight scars of operations.

The woman sulked and said the matter would be settled with thunder. Ntube eyed her and said it was unfortunate she hadn't money. If she had, she would go to Banso the next day and see the heavens that would come down.

"Madam, let me tell you, you are small. In spite of my state of health, I would squeeze you like a washed towel, and that your thunder will do me nothing. You threaten me? Graffi! thing, *nchong*" she insulted.

“Komot with buna witch. You too na woman? Komot for my eye, *a dze kiyung*! See me some woman weh e no fit do anyting e de talk for me. Woman weh no fit born sef. *Kingwiy*, comot. If na you kill my sister you no go do five day. Beaf.”

“Five day? Buna small. Da your sister na born ye born so? *Mbwe*.”

Chapter Twenty Seven

The women got to Nso just when *Shay* Tefon had accepted through the intervention of the Fon, that his daughter be buried in Mr. Nsahbinla's compound. Mr. Nsahbinla had taken oath over the grave and was being helped from there.

"If I had known that people would take oath over the grave, I would have paid fare for that Bakossi witch to come up. The fool even had the guts of wanting to come here," the woman who quarrelled with Ntube in Victoria said.

One week after the burial, Mr. Nsahbinla returned to Victoria. He was under intense self-examination. He moved about spiritlessly. As the thoughts of his misfortunes lashed him, Nso erupted in divination. Both the Nsahbinla and the Tefon families wanted to know the cause of the death of Cecilia Nsahbinla. Before the arrival of the corpse, the Nsahbinla family had it that his former wife was the suspect. Mr. Nsahbinla himself had sponsored that belief when he was crying in Victoria. On their part, the Tefon family had it that Mr. Nsahbila had sold their daughter in Eboni Society for promotion. Those who were conversant with his rise told stories of how he had tried to kill his Bakossi wife but failed because of the toughness of Bakossi people. Waves of delegations shuttled between Nso and Victoria to report their findings to the Fon.

Shay Tefon was fast losing his patience. The death of his daughter had to be avenged. In the assembly of the *Nwerong* (Fon-makers) he presented his case. He appealed to the people's council to assist him in attacking the Bakossi tribe.

He said it was more likely that Nsahbinla's former wife killed his daughter than the other way round. That appeal sent wild cries of revenge to the warlords of Nso.

Fai Yerka weighed the situation and was the first to speak.

"Where is Bakossi?" he asked.

"In Kumba Division," somebody answered.

"How many days journey on foot?" he asked

The assembly looked at each other.

"Answer me."

"Several days if not weeks on foot, but one day by lorry," the same person responded.

"What weapon do they say the accused used?"

"Sorcery," somebody responded.

"And you think this tribe is devoid of sorcerers? I think if that Bakossi girl used witchcraft from a distance to kill our daughter, we should use witchcraft from a distance and destroy her. We have thunder lords among us. Let them do their duty. If you attack innocent Bakossi people you may live to regret."

There were murmurs for and against Fai Yerka's views.

Fai Mahwo put up his hand. After surveying the assembly with a telling eye, he asked the *Nweron* whether they could remember in living memory when the Nso tribe had lost a war.

"We have never lost a war."

"Tell me whether in living memory the Nso tribe has ever fought an unjust war."

"We have never fought an unjust war."

"Let me therefore tell you that this war you are talking about as if we share a common boundary with Bakossi people will be the first unjust war we shall fight and the first we shall lose."

Fai Wo-Vizdem was the next to speak. He cleared his throat and addressed himself to the Fon.

“Fon, maker and the made. Symbol of unity and power. Proud leader of a proud people. This land is a land of intelligent people. We rule the waves of culture and tradition. Before I streamline my support with what the earlier speakers have said, let me suggest that we make a thorough investigation before we take any action. A Nso child, boy or girl that goes defecating at the cross-roads of another tribe does not merit our support. Our son, Nsahbinla left all the Nso girls and went and married a Bakossi girl in Bakossi. Do we know whether he did as the Bakossi people do? Our daughter left all the unmarried Nso boys, and went and married a Nso boy married to a Bakossi girl. That is not all. I hear she refused polygamy. She asked that the first woman whom I hear had suffered enormously in the hands of our son, should be driven away. I even hear that the very woman wanted to come here to sympathise with us. You believe, wisdom of wisdom, that that girl is guilty of the blood of our daughter and is so bold to brave the odds? This land of our forefathers, our proud heritage should not be compromised in any way by uncouth, boorish tradition-breakers like Nsahbinla. He compromised our daughter. He is guilty of her blood. We should pursue him and not the Bakossi girl. Our daughter died in childbirth. I hear the Bakossi woman too missed death thrice in childbirth. Why only Nsahbinla?”

The assembly sat with sealed lips.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Ntube returned to Atieg to blacken her mother's grave. Because of the allegation that she was the one who had killed Mr. Nsahbinla's wife, the Nso community down south was very bitter against her. Mrs. Ndzerem could not believe it. She thought Mary was too ignorant to kill anybody. As such, she was split between identifying herself with Ntube, and following the masses. In the meantime, she decided not to have contact with her. But Ntube in her naiveté stopped to greet them when she was going to see Dr. Debo for her routine medical check up.

"Auntie," Ntube greeted exultingly. "I am happy to see you once more. I got your letter about the death of my former husband's wife and as you might have heard, I went to Victoria to sympathise with him. Unfortunately, you had left with the corpse and I hadn't money to follow you up to Nso. I thank you very much for what you sent. Life is pretty difficult with me. But I believe once my health improves, I shall manage to live in my own way. I pity Causis. I am going to Victoria now for my rendezvous with my Doctor. After that, I shall return to the village to complete the rituals of my mother's death. After that, I shall settle wherever the wind blows me."

"Thank you very much Mary for calling. You are wonderful. I admire your courage especially when it concerns your former husband. We were told you tried to catch up with us in Victoria but you missed us and could not follow us to Nso because you hadn't money. That was wonderful. As you are going to Victoria, you should block your ears.

Brush aside whatever people say about you, or what they may tell you somebody else said about you concerning the death of Nsahbinla's wife."

"What will they say again? I have heard all. When I arrived in Victoria, his people accused me of killing his wife. Of course, they have every reason to suspect that. I know even Nsahbinla himself nurses such feelings. If I have time I shall visit him although I wrote to him sympathising with him."

"It would be good if you visited him. We have you at heart. God bless you. Please, on your way back, stop here for a day or so. I know my husband is preparing something for you."

Ntube left for Victoria after the brief stop. When she got to the hospital, she got down from the vehicle, and as she entered the gate of the main building, she heard a call from behind. She turned and saw the President of the Bakossi Women's Association, Victoria branch.

"Sister Mary, welcome. News flies. Didn't I hear you were in the village? How did the news reach you so soon? You might have travelled all night."

Ntube could not decipher anything from what the President of B.W.A, was saying. "What news?", she asked in surprise.

"The news about Mr. Nsahbinla's demise. He fainted and is paralysed on the left side. Yesterday, he could not talk. We feared he would die. But by midnight, he started picking up. His condition is now stable."

Ntube stood transfixed, a sort of mordant pain ran through her veins. She gazed at the President of B.W.A, and after a long minute, she said she did not hear of the mishap. "What happened to him?"

"They say he fainted when he was dismissed from his job and all his things including the car seized for the money he borrowed from the bank. They say the Nso people sent a delegation accompanied by their most powerful juju, the

Nkogh, to the Prime Minister demanding his dismissal on grounds of gross violation of Nso tradition and culture. They say some of his friends of the Return from Tour Club in Kumba testified against him for insulting the Nso women and their traditional values. He was rushed to hospital almost dead. But as I said earlier, he is recovering though he cannot recognise people.”

Ntube shivered from head to toe. She shuddered for a while, then picked up courage and asked the President of B.W.A. to take her to the ward.

“It is not time for visits. He is in the intensive care unit. The nurses don’t want people to disturb him. So even if they allow us in you should not disturb him. Don’t make noise.”

“Waa,” Ntube exclaimed. “What kills the toad cannot spare the frog. *Nsahbinla* and myself have become the crab that is killed with its own pincers. Sister, let’s go. Let me see him before I see my Doctor.”

Ntube and the President of B.W.A. got by Mr. *Nsahbinla*’s bed when he had defecated and needed help. Ntube called a nurse and helped her tidy him up. The nurse was very impressed. For the first time since they brought him to hospital, somebody was showing concern for him.

“Madam, we thought this patient had nobody in Victoria. When they brought him here yesterday, they simply threw him at us. The few people who come, stare at him from a distance and go away.” The nurse said.

Ntube lost track of memory and did not respond immediately. After a long minute she said, “He is my former husband.” The nurse stared at her. Mr. *Nsahbinla* seemed to have heard. He made a certain movement and tried to lift himself up. The nurse bent down to listen to him. He whispered inaudibly. “Madam,” the nurse drew Ntube’s attention. “I think he is trying to talk to you.” Ntube bent down to listen but like the nurse, she could decipher nothing.

For about thirty minutes Mr. Nsahbinla struggled to tell her something but the message could not go through.

“Sister,” Ntube called the nurse. “I came to Victoria to see Dr. Debo. He has a rendezvous with me this afternoon. After seeing him, I shall return because I brought only two dresses here. I have to go to Kumba and tell Mr. Ndzerem the situation of Mr. Nsahbinla. I would have liked to stay on to assist in caring for him. But I don’t have money. Mr. Ndzerem has to step in, in this matter.”

“Yes, if he has people in Kumba they should come and assist him. When he gets out of this situation, he will need food and other things. So, you better go and tell the people,” the nurse advised.

Ntube returned to Kumba and told Mr. Ndzerem the hell Mr. Nsahbinla was going through. She said if she had a bit of money and some dresses, she would have stayed behind to assist him, although that would have created much talk. She promised she would readily return to Victoria if Mr. Ndzerem would give her financial support.

“Mary,” Mrs. Ndzerem addressed her. “This is a very delicate situation. I appreciate your concern for Mr. Nsahbinla. But if you return to help him in any way, you will glue the accusation that you killed his wife on you. On the other hand, there is nobody now ready to help him. My husband can give financial support. But money alone is not sufficient. I am in fact confused. I cannot possibly go to Victoria and remain there for more than two days. So, as you return to Atieg, I shall send somebody to Nso, to tell his family to send somebody to help him. In that way, if you go there to assist him you won’t keep long with him. So, return and when you come we shall put our heads together.”

Chapter Twenty Nine

While Ntube was away, Ewang-Ename assembled the villages that constitute the Mbuogmut clan – Atieg, Ekenzu, Ngolo, Muabag. Both men and women assembled in his compound. When everybody was seated, Ewang-Ename stepped forward and addressed the people.

“Fathers and mothers of this land. I salute you. I have assembled you here today to tell you that, ‘A child that inherits a stable does not know how difficult it is to tend goats and bring them up to the status of a stable. Our people don’t build a stable for a single goat or two. They build for a flock. To a child that inherits a stable, a goat is meat and it can be killed at any time there is no meat in the house. I have assembled you here today, to tell you that, where there are people, a hen does not hatch in the open. I have called you together to tell you that, it was because of shame, because his people exposed him to shame that *Sango* Ntoko hanged himself. I have called you here today, to tell you that when chickenpox attacks one part of the body, the whole body is contaminated. I have called you here today, to tell you that when the legs trek, the forehead sweats. Since this Ntube’s calamity began, no person, not a single elderly person, a wise person of this clan, has knocked at my door to talk to me how our forebears handled such matters. Perhaps everybody thinks it is my problem and I should solve it myself. When a fruit is ripe and there is no person to harvest it, it falls to the ground on its own. Today, before all of you, I have decided to solve Ntube’s problem.

But I can't solve it alone in your presence. Our people say, 'He who is present at a pudding-eating ceremony does not return home with a dirty index finger'.

Ntube had been tended. Nsahbinla met her when she was already fully grown. He did not know what it took to bring her up to that level. That is why he could treat her with spite. We all know that because a fox does not know the price of a fowl, it eats one with no etiquette. Nsahbinla ate Ntube with no etiquette. But is Ntube not you? By disgracing her, has Nsahbinla not disgraced you? To cut a long story short, can you tell me that the things *Sango* Nyamempango wants for the cleansing of Ntube cannot be got among you? Can you say our forefathers did not leave those things behind? Do you want a hen to hatch in the open in your presence? Let me tell you, great parents of our times, if you throw Ntube away, you will be unable to tackle the problems of this generation. To lead the course of action, here, here, fathers and mothers of this land, here is the brideprice that Nsahbinla gave me. Not one single penny has been taken from it ever since he gave it to me. *A mue* Ejolle, is that not how we tied it? If Ntube returns from her journey give it to her to refund to Nsahbinla. Let her be free. They cannot talk of divorce while she still keeps his brideprice. She has to return it. And once she is free and we cleanse her, she can do what she wants. She can be my second wife if she likes or she can get married to any other person. She can even remain in her mother's compound and bring it up. Our people say, 'A second foraging kills the partridge'. I know she can never try another foreigner. I challenge you fathers and mothers of this clan, assign yourselves with what you will bring for the cleansing. If possible let's assign what each village will bring. What do we call Ntube? Don't we call her 'the daughter-of-the-upstream-python?' When did we say that her father was no longer the rainbow of our clan?"

The assembly sat dumbfounded for some time. Then *Sango Nzume* of Ekenzu (Prime chief of Mbuogmut clan) stepped forth and intoned a song.

Solo *E yaya pel a nlem, e ye e ye ye he, e yaya pel a nlem*
E mbe me pel, e mah me pel a nlem, e yaya pel a
nlem

Chorus *E yaya pel a nlem, e ye e ye ye he, e yaya pel a nlem*
E yaya pel a nlem, e ye e ye e he, e yaya pel a nlem.

(There was a grudge in my heart. Now there is no
grudge anymore, the grudge is ended)

After the song, he clasped his hands and raised them and the assembly responded, “Ya”.

“People of Mbuogmut clan, I salute you. You have heard the accusation. But let me tell *Mue Ewang-Ename* that, a song with a chorus needs a lead singer. Today, he has brought himself forth as the soloist of *Ntube’s* song. Before you eat pork, you should know where the latrine is. Today he has shown us where the latrine of this matter is. As we leave this place now, I promise that my village will give *Ntube* the complete bone of a white man.”

The applause that followed deafened the people. *Ahone* jumped into the middle of the grove and started dancing. Other women jumped in and danced and ululated with her. *Sango Nzume* then assigned *Sango Enongene* chief of *Ngolo* to bring the complete bone of an albino. “*A mue*,” he said and pointed at the chief of *Atieg*, “you will bring the barks of the male trees of *Kupe*, *Muanenguba* and *Fako Mountains*. *Mue*, chief of *Muabag*, will bring thunder and electric fish. *Mue*, *Ejolle* will bring the waters of both the male and female lakes of *Muanenguba*. *Nyango Ahone* will bring the basket-of-the-child or the cord-of-the-child. Other people should come forth and tell us what they will bring,” the chief concluded.

The people responded positively and very soon, all the things required for the cleansing were pledged. Each village then appointed a person to help Ewang-Ename collect the item it had been assigned or it had pledged.

The assembly then agreed that upon Ntube's return, they would give her the things and ask her to refund the brideprice, and then arrange for the purification ceremony.

Chapter Thirty

Ewang-Ename was highly elated with the success of the meeting. He lavishly entertained the people. Women ululated, did shuttle runs and sang praises for his magnanimity. They said they had never seen a man who had defied death and loss of property, and honoured the dead, as Ewang-Ename was honouring Emade. Some offered to talk to Ntube to accept being his second wife after refunding Mr Nsahbinla's brideprice.

Such talk tended to rend Eduke's heart. She whimpered to nearby women that she did not see why the Ntube affair had been turned into a potion, and the whole clan was being coaxed to drink it. "Such an act," she said, "could provoke a plague in the clan." The women paid a deaf ear. They considered such talk as a replay of the rivalry between Emade and her. According to them, Emade was dead and there was no reason why the living should spit on the dead. Finding that she did not make an impact on the women, Eduke got up and started scampering from one chief to another. She told them that it wasn't proper for the clan to be dragged into the Ntube affair. "Let the goat that breaks into fences bear the restraining yoke alone. Let Emade display her bomper crop to the nations and get the praises for it herself," she said at a certain point, moved to her husband, dragged him by the hand and whispered to him not to be partisan in the search for the ritual things.

Hearing that, Nzegge called *Sango* Nzume, the chief of Ekenzu and told him about his wife's concerns. The chief who had taken offence when Eduke had met him on the

matter, did some mental skimming and promised that he would convene a meeting of all chiefs and members of the *Abon* and *Muankum* cults in the grove of the clan at Ekenzu the next day.

The meeting started early. When everybody had sat down, Chief Nzume moved to the centre of the horseshoe and addressed his people. "Patriarchs of this land, you who wear beads made of the fangs of lions, you who drink palm wine in the horns of buffalos, you who meet in *ekom* (the mystical assembly of our ancestors in the crest of Kupe), we were all present yesterday at *Mue* Ewang-Ename's compound when I assigned each chief a specific ritual item to bring for Ntube's purification. Great leaders of this clan, the past is not so misty to all of us. I remember how our ancestors handled situations like the one before us. But I am scandalised to hear what some of us and even women are saying concerning this matter. Before I drain entrails in public, let *Mue* Nzege tell us what he has heard."

Nzege got up, sneezed, ran his hands down his face and addressed the assembly, "Great patriarchs of this clan, you tie and untie the knots of Bakossi in *ekom*. You are as awesome as a lion basking in the sun. He who grips you grips spiculate grass. You generate the whirlwinds and storms that emanate from Kupe and Muanenguba Mountains. You embody the wisdom of this clan. You are the boundary post between life and death. But great pinnacles of our land, we all know what it means to step on rotten banana. The matter that took us to Ewang-Ename's compound yesterday is like stepping on rotten banana. If we are not careful, we shall slip, fall and lose our teeth. Although a boa is all powerful to swallow a porcupine, it does so with great precautions? It does so, in accordance with natural principles? It swallows from the head to streamline the shallowing process with the spikes? Have we done the same in this matter? Have we been conscious of protecting our clan? Our women folk believe that we

have allowed ourselves to be dragged into the Ntube affair without thought. That is why, I, on their behalf, told chief Nzume that we should reconsider our commitment in the affair. Let us not bring onto ourselves the wrath of our ancestors.

Each village has been assigned a ritual item for Ntube's purification. Where will the chiefs take those items? The Bakossi tribe has never fought a war with white men. No white man has ever died and was buried here. There are no albinos in Bakossi. Where shall we take the demanded bones? We hear thunder rumble in distant hills. How do we catch it to bring it for Ntube's purification? Do you therefore see, great patriarchs that we have set for ourselves an impossible task and that if we are not careful, each and every one of us will end up being contaminated with this affair? We should remember that things of the night are not tampered with in half-measures. You either know how to handle them, or you don't dare. That is all I have to say."

The assembly sat quiet. Hearts throbbed. Most chiefs thought the Ntube's affair had been brought back to square one. Nzegge saw the impact of his speech slash the minds of the leaders of the clan. He felt a tingling glow of happiness overwhelm him. Emade had called him, 'thing' some years back when she was quarrelling with his wife Eduke. Now he was revenging. He looked up at Ejolle and grinned spitefully. Ejolle understood the message. By grinning at him, Nzegge was indirectly snobbing Ewang-Ename who was not a member of either of the cults and was not as such, in the grove.

Ewang-Ename had lost his father in childhood and was not initiated into either of the cults, but he had built an aura of respect for himself that most people admired. Ejolle could not tolerate Nzegge's rebuff against his friend Ewang-Ename, whom he thought was made of better stuff. He sprang from his seat, dashed to the middle of the horseshoe and asked chief Nzume to permit him speak.

“Fathers of this land, we have all heard what *Sango* Nzegge has said. If I had known that he was calling us here to scrape old scars, I would not have come. I inherited my father’s chair in these august cults when I was a child. But let me tell all of you that whatever happened at the time, I took note. I did not only inherit. I improved on what I inherited by climbing the iroko tree and dancing with two pure black *elob* (staffs of nobility used in dancing *abon*) – one in either hand, on the same day. Who doubts what that means? If I am not mistaking, I was told *Sango* Nzegge had inherited his position from his father long before my situation. In spite of that age difference, can he today say he can eat the liver of a goat in my presence? Here, it is neither age nor inheritance that counts. It is individual prowess – the man in man in the context of men. Not empty words. Not pith, but hard wood. Not wrenching the necks of fowls, but those of buffalos. Not the paws of cats but those of tigers,” Ejolle said, chest-pounding himself.

“Although,” he continued, “*Mue* Ewang-Ename did not inherit, he had prepared to initiate himself into these two cults by climbing the iroko tree and dancing with two pure black *elobs* on the same day. Do we doubt his ability? In whose valley shall we meet the broken gourds of our wives and children, in Ewang-Ename’s or in Nzegge’s? Unfortunately, Ntube’s problem stood on *Mue* Ewang-Ename’s way. And hasn’t he shown beyond all doubts that he is a man of strong standing? Is there any of us here who would not have used the money Nsahbinla gave him in marrying another woman? Did he do so? Did he not prefer to toil for another sum to marry the wife who is in his house now? Shouldn’t that merit praise rather than ridicule and back stabbing? Great warriors of our land, doesn’t *Mue* Ewang-Ename deserve our admiration rather than this blatant display of vile and ignorance about the hidden dimensions of our traditional values?

My father once told me that, if one found an elephant devastating his neighbour's farm and did not drive it away, it would turn onto his when it finished with his neighbour's. Our best solution in Ntube's matter is that we use fire canisters to drive away the elephant. But I am scandalized to hear a self-professed defender of our clan say that we should allow a flood devastate the farm in the valley. If we could attest that he had a farm in the hills, we would have said that he was just being nonchalant at other people's misfortunes. But we all know that he hasn't a farm even in the hills. As such, he is just being wicked. I say he is just being wicked because our people say that, 'He who owns a stable, dreads seeing the footprints of a tiger even in a neighbouring village'. But see, great pinnacles of our land; *Sango* Nzegge ululates in seeing one in his village. This goes to confirm our foreparents' proverb that, 'It is because a chameleon knows that nobody eats it that it is in no hurry to escape or alert other animals escape from a hunting zone'. Yes, so long as the guns are not pointed at it, all is well.

I am even more surprised to hear him deplume our clan in public. Perhaps there are some of us here who dance with multicoloured *elob*. For sure, there should be. Chief Nzume invited people indiscriminately – even *mbwelid* (people of doubtful stock). I thought he would have invited only the members of *Ndib Ahon* (the executive of the Ahon cult). In saying that our great ancestors never fought and defeated the white man, *Sango* Nzegge implies that their claim to greatness is a farce. He implies that we don't merit the prime of place among other clans. My question is, if our parents did not fight and win the white man which clan, which tribe did, in Southern Cameroon? If that statement had been made in the presence of women, or strangers I would have suggested that we fine him an animal with no fur on its body. I wonder whether *Sango* Nzegge is a *Nhon*. Did he climb the *Ahon* iroko tree. Did he swim in the depths

of *Ndib Abon*? Did he learn the language of *Mwengu*. Did he catch Muankum by the tail? Or, is it that when a person inherits, he does not do these things! If he did, and still fumbles, then I shall call him *esosob' apom* (an unseasoned gourd in which drinking water can't be preserved) I shall conclude by saying that, we should dismiss his speech as the talk of a woman. Let it vanish from our minds like spittle in a stream. He is just the vessil of women. The wisdom of women is simply passing through him. Else, he has to be reinitiated into these cults”.

Nzegge felt the spikes of insults devastate his personality. He stood up with a twang, and lashing his index finger threateningly at Ejolle, dashed toward him with a terrible anger-induced hiccough. He crossed the centre of the grove, but before he violated what would have been considered Ejolle's space, chief Nzume got the staff of peace and pinned it in the middle of the grove. Nzegge knew the consequences of defying the staff of peace. He eyed it sideways and withdrew to his side of the grove with bloodshot eyes – anger bubbling in him like wet carbide. The Bakossi people say, ‘A quarrel over a fence does not bleed’. The space was a fence and no matter how provocative Ejolle's words were, they did not warrant the violation of his space.

Chief Nzume had expected spontaneous condemnation of Ejolle for (apparently) unprovoked aggression. But the orators and sages of the clan sat with sealed lips. He looked at the assembly and shook his head. Finally he concluded that, no person was willing to ‘carry gourds to a dry valley’. Yet something had to be done. Somebody had to break the silence. Chief Nzume winked at several sages of the clan but whenever his eyes met with those of one of them, the latter shook his head to indicate that he had nothing to say.

After a considerable length of time however, chief Enongene stood up and addressed the assembly. “Pinnacles of our clan”, he called while adjusting his loincloth, “I read

from your faces that you are as stunned as I am in what has transpired between *Mue Ejolle* and *Mue Nzegge*. It is pitiful that the like can happen among us. Our forefathers said, 'As the elderly age, the young must sprout'. This did not imply that the sprouting young must mow the elderly. *Mue Ejolle* has wrung *Mue Nzegge* as one wrings a washed towel. The venom we have heard cannot be of this quarrel. It is surely the dregs of a previous quarrel – a quarrel I think, none of us witnessed and even if we did, none of us will be prepared to delve into at this moment. While I think it is improper to condone *Mue Ejolle*'s behaviour, especially as it threatens our time honoured values of respect for the elderly, I would reiterate our foreparents' proverb that, 'If you are harvesting mushrooms and you see faeces at a corner, take a leaf and cover the faeces and continue harvesting. If you don't, the faeces will impede your harvesting'. Let us cover the faeces before us now and concentrate on what has brought us here. After that, or some other day, we shall find out (if the aggrieved wants us to) what caused the elephant to trampled the crab and the brook dried up..."

Before chief Enongene ended what he was saying, *Nhon Ngoe* stood up and congratulated him for making a brilliant proposal. "*A ndib ebinten*, (deep dark pool)", *Nhon Ngoe* addressed chief Enongene by his praise name. "Let me rub oil on what you have said. You have spoken as if you were in my mind. If we try to handle these two problems now, we shall end up solving none. In fact, what people may see as two problems, I see as one. If we examine the minds of *Mue Ejolle* and *Mue Nzegge* properly, we shall find that they are not as opposed as they appear to be. Both are dwelling on protecting our clan. They are saying the same thing in different words and different temperaments. When *Mue Nzegge* addressed us, didn't he call us the pinnacles that tie and untie the knots of Bakossi in *ekom*? Was that not sufficient recognition of our prowess? Was it necessary for

him to continue his speech again? Did he not say it all? I call what he said later, a slip of thought. And can we crusify somebody for making a slip of thought? We did not invent the tying and untying of knots in *ekom*. We inherited it from the roaring lions that left this land. What they called white man bone was white man bone. What they called albino bone was albino bone. What they called thunder was thunder. And that is what chief Nzume, *aben e ngii, ngokume, ndib e yobke* (the paw of a lion that chills the spines of goats, the python that swallows without chewing, the whirlpool in which even frogs drown) has asked his collaborators to bring for the purification of Ntube. It is the person who ties a bundle who knows what is in it. So, what we shall call white man bone, will be white man bone. What we shall call albino bone will be albino bone. That is the language of *Mwengu* and that is how our foreparents spoke it. That is how our foreparents maned this land. Does an iguana go around telling the world that it has no teeth...?"

Nhon Ngoc did not finish what he was saying, an elated Ejolle hopped into the middle of the grove and 'challenged' him to a self-praise pattering 'duel'.

"*A nchom ngii, e mwe mbeng we,*" (male-lion, let me hail you) Ejolle requested, and in a simultaneous hopping about in a mock dance, dramatised and pattered their self-praises.

Ejolle:

I am the cock that crows at home

And in foreign lands.

The timeless mists that beard the crests

Of Kupe and Muanenguba Mountains

And the 'earth' beholds with awe.

I shun the thoughtless sun

That dispells the secrets of the night,

And yet the night that begets the sun

Knows not the sun, nor the sun, the night.

I am the fangs of the roaring lion
The birthmark of an ancient clan
That destroyed columns of white soldiers.
He who steps on me steps on flowing magma
O sung ongwe, ongwe ngwe.

Nhon Ngoe:

I am the scorpion's tail
Tabernacle of latent poison.
The tortoise that carries wisdom on his back,
The sound of the last drum beat
Caught lingering in shame-faced valleys of
Defeated gods.
I belong to the cannibal legions
That gulp the stale life of war.
I am *Ndoko bewudu* (the stubborn spiculate grass)
Cut today, tomorrow I sprout again.
I wrestled with the gorilla at the cross-roads,
I share the boundary post with death.
O sung ongwe, ongwe ngwe

When the patterers got simultaneously to the (nonsense refrain) *O sung ongwe, ongwe ngwe*, they hooked their right hands and danced in a whirl, embraced each other, and clapped hands over their heads and ended with a hand shake.

That mastery of the art of self-praise recitation thrilled the assembly. Only very few people, mostly the elderly in Lower Bakossi could do it. The fact that Ejolle, a young man, could do it with great mastery won for him great admiration and tended to sooth things out. Even Nzegge who had been bubbling with rage, was seen nodding approvingly.

Chief Nzume read the distraction in the faces of the people and seizing the opportunity ended the discussion. "Pinnacles of our land", he said, "we all know that, if a piece of kola-nut is chewed for too long, it becomes slimmy.

We should also know that, a fruit tree that decides to grow very tall in order to avoid being molested by children, cannot avoid being molested by storms. So, what we may want to avoid in one form may turn out to worry us in another form. So, in whatever way we see Ntube's case, we cannot escape from it. So, (and these are the principles of Muankum) whatever we have discussed here, whatever has transpired among us here, should not be heard out of these circles. You all know the fine – an animal without fur. Let us not prolong this matter any longer. I suggest that we uphold what we had agreed on, and bring the things each village was assigned."

"You have knotted the matter", the assembly echoed in unison.

Chapter Thirty One

Ntube returned three days before the Ngomboku market day. She told her aunt Ahone (who was still blackening her sister's grave) that she would be returning to Victoria again to help her former husband who was seriously ill in the hospital. Ahone feigned deafness. She did not tell Ntube of the decision of the clan. She wanted the clan to assemble and challenge her with the things. Ntube would then decide to take the things and do what the clan wanted, or reject them and go to Victoria.

In the evening of the day before the Ngomboku market, the chief summoned all the chiefs and dignitaries of the Mbuogmut clan to Atieg. They danced Muankum the whole night. At dawn, they moved down to Emade's compound with the dancing. They woke up Ntube and Ahone. They led them to the middle of the circle and for the first time in Bakossiland danced the Muankum dance round women. After dancing eight times, the lead singer cried out in a large voice, '*A hei ei ei ei, yu!*' the assembly responded '*Ya*'.

Then the chief moved forward and addressed Ntube and Ahone. "*A nyangu Ahon*", the Muankum dance is not danced in the open. Today we dance it in the open because the matter that has brought us here has to be discussed in the open. It is when the lizard sloughs that it grows. There is an old skin that is hindering the growth of our daughter and that of all of us. We have come here to tell her, that when the leg is hurt the mouth does not smile. Her problems are our problems. We cannot be happy while she is sad. We cannot say we are healthy while she is in pains. She is one

of us. And so, the pinnacles of this clan have decided that the abomination she is carrying should be cleansed once and for all."

And turning to Ntube he addressed her, "Daughter-of-the-upstream-python, your father was a great man in this community. He incarnated Muankum in this clan. He was the custodian of all sacred things of our forefathers. But he died young. Today, we cannot watch with sealed lips and folded arms his lone daughter being swept away by a torrent of problems. We have danced Muankum the whole night to evoke the ancestral spirits to come and join hands with us. Today is Ngomboku market day. In the presence of all the living and the dead, (Emade too has become a spirit) we offer you all the things necessary for your purification. We shall shoulder all the expenses of the ceremony. But before the ceremony takes place, you have to refund Mr. Nsahbinla's brideprice. You cannot talk of divorce without refunding his brideprice. You have to be free. So, here is the brideprice."

The chief moved forward and handed the bundle of money Ewang-Ename had given him, to Ntube. She took it with both hands, her heart throbbing with excitement and hope. She scrutinised the bundle, recognised the piece of cloth with which it was tied and laughed ludicrously. Then the chief gave her a small kitchen basket. She held the money in her right hand and the basket in her left hand.

"*A mue*, those who have the purification things should come forth and put them in the basket," the chief said, and pointed to the basket.

The chief of Ekenzu stepped forth. He brandished the white man bone for all to see. "Bone, I bring you forth on behalf of my village. Consummate the on-coming cleansing of our daughter Ntube, daughter-of-the-upstream-python. We here pledge that when the purification is done, nobody will mention the affair anymore. From today, you will be our watchdog. If any person attempts to spoil the purification

before it is carried out, or mentions the matter after it is carried out, let the forces of evil trail him and his family. Shiii, shiii”, the chief squirted blessings on the bone and continued, “You crossed seven seas and seven rivers, seven hills and seven valleys, seven forests and seven deserts to come to this place. There is no secret in all these lands that you don’t know. We ask you to forage for the truth in this matter so that nothing is hidden, and when we come here to carry out the purification, it should just be a fulfilling formality. We empower you to represent us in the ancestral council. Let what we desire here be what our ancestors desire there.” He then moved forward and put the bone in the basket, raised his hands and the people responded, “*Ya*”.

The chief of Ngolo stepped forward and held high the albino bone. “Albino bone,” he addressed the bone. “You are neither white nor black. You do not see in the day but you are a cat at night. Ply into the hidden dimensions of this matter as the earlier speaker has entreated and bring us good fruits. Be the cleansing force on the day of purification. You are a symbol of peace. Wherever there is a dispute people look upon you to settle it. So be the bridge between the ancestral world and our world. Let Ntube, our daughter, be purified.”

The other people did not make speeches. They simply said, ‘Item, I put you in the basket to do as the chiefs have said.’ After all had put their items in the basket, Ahone took the cord-of-the-child and put it in the basket.

The chief of Atieg scrutinised the things to ascertain that every item was there.

“Fathers and mothers of this clan, is there anything lacking? Is there an item we have forgotten?” The assembly answered in a loud voice, “Noooo, there is nothing we have forgotten.”

The chief then raised his hands and said, “Little goat, here are herbs, herbs, here is a little goat.”

With that, he signalled the drummers and the compound echoed in song and dance. The people first danced in a circle, then filed behind the chief as he danced out of the compound. Presently, Ntube was left alone with the things. At this point, her senses clicked open. She stood with the money in her right hand, and the basket in her left hand. She pondered over the things for some time and thought of asking some one what she had to do next. But there was no person around. Even her aunt Ahone, had moved away. She peered into her mother's hut and saw her. She called her and asked for advice.

"Daughter-of-the-upstream-python, you heard what the chief said. You are now like a little goat tethered in the field. It is given the option to eat grass and live or to refuse it and die. In the same vein, the grass is asked to offer itself to the little goat. It is left to you to do as they have said or reject what they have said. You are lucky. Everything that was a hindrance to your purification is now here. The day I discovered the cord-of-the-child, I knew God was with you. So, take the decision yourself. We have done our part," Ahone said, got her walking stick and tottered to the market.

Mary Ntube, daughter-of-the-upstream-python stood bowled over. Her thoughts raced from Atieg to Victoria, and from her predicament to that of Nsahbinla. Sandwiched by the burning desire to be purified, and the moral obligation she had on Nsahbinla she breathed stertorously and gazed at the money and the ritual things. She thought of dashing to Victoria immediately and dumping the brideprice on Mr. Nsahbinla's sick bed. The money would help him treat himself. But on second thought she thought it would be inhuman to engage a dying man in a problem he would not be conscious enough to appreciate. After pondering over it for some time, she decided to seek advice from her godmother in the Mission. She put the things down and left for the Mission.

Chapter Thirty Two

“Who am I seeing! Is that the Daughter-of-the-upstream-python? Or, Am I mistaking?” Ntube’s godmother asked when she saw her coming.

“Mother, you are not mistaking. It is me.”

“Welcome, Daughter-of-the-up-stream. You have saved my aching feet from trekking to Atieg. I have made a thousand and one trips to Atieg. My mind’s eyes reached there but my body remained here. Thank you for coming,”

“Thank you mother, I knew you would be worried about my problems at home”

“For Sure. Where the pain is, there the hand is found. I couldn’t be indifferent.”

“I would have come here long ago but a mind that is warped by problems is never steady. Sometimes, I even forget doing the most essential things for myself.”

“I know you are in serious problems, but if you give them all to God, He will lead you through.”

“If I am living, it is thanks to God. He has always protected me from life-threatening situations. I am faced with another one, that is why I have come for advice. My people have given me the ritual things *Sango* Nyamempango wanted for the purification. They have also given me the brideprice and have asked me to go and return it to my former husband in Victroria. That is why I have come to ask you what I should do,”

“I heard about all that. Where is *Mwe* Ahone, your aunt?”

“She is at home. She is angry with me and does not talk to me because she believes I am intransigent. She expects me to go to Victoria and refund Nsahbinla’s money.”

"Where do your people say they got the money? It is unheard of in Bakossiland that a woman refunds her own brideprice. It is always another suitor who does so."

"I have not asked where they got the money, but there is a rumour that *Seh* Ewang-Eneme gave them the money."

"He wants you to be his second wife? Will that tie well with your Christian status? Will he abandon his first wife and marry you in church?"

"Can anybody marry me now? Didn't Nsahbinla abandon me because of child-bearing problems?"

"Daughter-of-the-Up-stream-Python don't count yourself out. God works in a miraculous way. Just look at the story of Abraham. God promised him as many children as there were stars in the heavens and sands at the seashore. How many children had he? Only one, one child. God takes pleasure in creating abundance out of nothing."

"Mother may your word be blessed. Whatever shall be my fate, my preoccupation now is refunding Nsahbinla's brideprice. If I can go to Victoria and refund it, I shall prepare myself for whatever comes my way."

"Yes, I think you better plan to go to Victoria. Let your people not say they gave you the opportunity and you missed it. Let the fault not come from you."

"I don't want them to say I did not do what they asked me to do. I shall go to Victoria."

"If you are to go, when will you leave?"

"When I return home now, I shall ask my aunt to invite her relatives to come and open my mother's boxes and share out her dresses. I shall also ask the chief to open my father's trunks and see whether they did not leave any juju items in them when they first opened them. If there are any, I shall tell them to take them away. Once that is done, I shall prepare to leave for Victoria if possible tomorrow."

"There again, there is a problem. I thought one or two people will go with you. Will you go alone?"

"I believe that is what is implied."

“If that is the case, give all into the hands of our Lord and saviour. All shall be well with you. I shall see you when you return. Go in peace and greet your aunt.”

Upon Ntube’s return from the Mission, she told her aunt what she had discussed with her godmother – her intention to go to Victoria, the need for her aunt to invite her sisters to come and open her late mother’s boxes and share out her dresses, and also the chief to open her late father’s trunks and take out any juju items found in them.

The next day, Ahone invited her relatives. They opened the boxes and in one of them found in tact, the money which Nsahbinla had given her late sister Emade. They also saw Emade’s personal savings. They shared the dresses but gave Ntube all the money. The next day, in the presence of Ahone, the chief and his councillors opened the trunks reluctantly. They had opened them before when Ntube was a baby and did not find any need opening them again. But on Ntube’s insistence, they opened them. They found nothing of interest but a good quantity of German marks and artefacts. Although they admired their grotesqueness, they attached little or no importance to them. So, they locked the trunks and gave Ntube the keys.

“I shall go to Victoria tomorrow,” Ntube announced to the chief and his councillors.

“Then I shall also return to my village tomorrow,” a jubilant and relieved Ahone also announced.

“Yes, you better return. You have kept too long here. Your husband should be tired of eating roasted plantains. We expect you here only when Ntube returns – when we shall carry out the purification,” one of the councillors remarked.

The next morning Ntube and Ahone bade each other good bye. News quickly spread that Ntube had gone to refund the brideprice and would be back as soon as possible. The Mbwogmtut clan started girding for the celebration of the purification.

Chapter Thirty Three

Ntube got to Victoria just in time to prevent the hospital authorities from throwing out Nsahbinla. His sister had badly run short of money. His hospital bills had accumulated and his sister was virtually starving. Although Mr. Ndzerem had intervened twice, his help went mostly for food. The drugs were not bought and the hospital authorities felt that instead of keeping him without treatment, it was better to send him home. On hearing this, Ntube paid the bills with the money she had brought, bought drugs and went and saw the doctor to plead with him to keep Nsahbinla in hospital until he was well enough to be discharged. The doctor complained about the bills and suggested that it was better to take him home.

"I have paid the bills and I have bought the recommended foods. I have also given his sister money to ease her up in other things," Ntube said and showed the doctor the receipts.

"Your patient also needs company. His sister is almost tired and does not spend as much time with him as it would have been desired."

"I shall keep him company,"

"Madam, where have you been all this time? I have never heard somebody express concern for that patient like this. How are you related to him?"

"So, so,"

"And you tend to care that much?"

"It is the curse of being a woman."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That a woman is more caring, more sympathetic and more concerned when the going gets rough."

“OK, let’s go and see him.”

The doctor and Ntube got to Nsahbinla’s ward just when the nurse with whom Ntube had taken care of him before she returned to Atieg was taking over. When she saw Ntube she was delighted. The doctor examined Nsahbinla and after prescribing more drugs, left, leaving Ntube and the nurse.

“Madam, welcome. You stayed too long at home. I thought you would be there for only a week. How are your people?”

“One’s home is one’s home. Here and there, there are problems and one can’t easily pull herself out of them. That’s why I kept that long. My people are well. Let me not forget, I’ve brought you some yams and egussi. When you are returning take them from the gateman. He says he knows you.”

“Thank you. If I had known your village I would have come for you. Your husband felt the impact of your departure. You know he tried to talk to you when you said you would return to the village. When you left, he became depressed and never responded to commands anymore. Now that you have come, make him know you are around.”

“What special ties have we now that he can’t do without me? Here I am. If he wants to eat me let him do so now.”

“You know such patients. He needs attention. He needs love. His bills have been piling up and the hospital is about stopping his treatment. So, he needs you.”

“I have already paid the bills and given his sister some money for other needs.”

“That is great. I think your presence will help him recover faster. He needs psychological therapy. He thinks the whole world has abandoned him. You can revive him with caresses and reassuring words. Speak to him. Show you care.”

“I’ll do my best but I shall rely on your cooperation. You have been very wonderful to him. God willing, our combined efforts will yield good fruits.”

“We all pray for that.”

“Sister let me go and buy the drugs the doctor has just prescribed. I’ll perhaps also go and greet Father Joe our former Parish Priest in Kumba. I hear he was transferred here when he returned from his sick leave.”

“Father Joe! You’ll only come back tomorrow. Father Joe’s conversations never end.”

“When I show him the drugs, he will understand that I am in a hurry.”

Chapter Thirty Four

After buying the drugs, Ntube went and saw Father Joe. He welcomed her heartily and asked her a thousand questions about her husband, their marriage in church, their children, and where they were working at that moment. Ntube answered the questions frankly. She told him about their misfortunes in childbirth, their divorce and Nsahbinla's demice. She showed him the drugs and expressed her desire to hurry back to the hospital and give the patient the drugs.

"Go and give him the drugs. I am extremely sorry for what happened to you both. It is unfortunate."

"Father, I nearly forgot. I discovered some German marks and artefacts in my late father's trunk. Can you help me sell them?"

"If they were here I would have known whether they would sell. Did you bring them?"

"No Father. They are in the trunks at home."

"OK, if you have time, go for them and we shall see if we can sell them."

Upon arrival at the hospital, Ntube told the nurse about the German marks and artefacts and Father Joe's willingness to help her find a buyer.

"Madam, you may be sitting on a gold mine. I saw a Bamenda man sell artefacts here the other day and I was astonished at the price tourists offered. Things I had no value for were sold at hundreds of pounds."

"Sister, how I wish your words came true! I actually need money to solve the numerous problems I have. I have thought of applying for a job in Kingsways but I fear the

manager won't take me. He had worried me in the past. Since I did not give in, he will want to revenge. Furthermore, the positions I had occupied in Buea and elsewhere make it impossible for me to apply for mean jobs like serving in bars. So, Caius Nsahbinla has destroyed my life completely."

Ntube's remarks sort of pricked and jolted Nsahbinla from his lying position. He shuddered perhaps in a bid to respond, but fell silent. The nurse who stood facing him saw the abrupt movement but Ntube who stood backing him did not see. The nurse gasped and inhaled as if something serious had happened to the patient. Ntube giggled in surprise. The nurse rushed to the patient and raised him. Ntube turned and rushed to assist her.

"He is OK. There is nothing to worry about. It may be he overheard our conversation and wanted to respond to your comments."

"You have frightened me"

"It's a good sign. It shows he is conscious and responsive."

"What happened?"

"I think he tried to respond to what you said. If that is true, then he has not got brain damage. I have always held that view. I know your husband's greatest problem is depression."

"I pray he should recover."

"He will. This is the first time he has shown signs of recovery ever since you went back to the village."

"I am afraid, I have to go again. I have to go for the artefacts. Perhaps God will give me money by selling them."

"Then you should not announce it. Go stealthily and come back as soon as you can."

"I'll go in two days and come back as soon as I can."

Chapter Thirty Five

Ntube got to Atieg late in the evening, got the things and went and spent the night with her godmother in the Mission. She did not want anybody at Atieg to see her. Early in the morning she set off. When she reached Victoria, she took the things to Father Joe. He was amazed at their grotesqueness and promised to sell them only when the ship came. The ship was due in two weeks. When it finally came, Father Joe made a good deal. Ntube stood trasfixed when he gave her £300. She bowed in appreciation and offered to share the money with the Rev. Father on equal basis. He refused and asked her to use it in solving her problems. Ntube then got £250 and asked Father Joe to keep the rest for her till when she would be returning to Atieg.

Nsahbinla's situation improved dailly. He had started babbling and eating well. Ntube flattered and pampered him but time and again, an unkind remark broke the stopcock of the grievances she had against him. Whenever she uttered one, especially concerning the maltreatment he meted on her, he would take hold of her hand, fondle with it and try to apologize.

One day, Ntube took a pen and wrote down:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|-------------|
| 1) Money to Ewang-Ename | £200 |
| 2) Cow..... | £5 |
| 3) Money to Emade..... | £25 |
| 4) Money to Ahone..... | £10 |
| 5) Sitting allowance (mekonde)..... | £5 |
| | <u>£235</u> |

Then she got the receipts she was keeping:

1) Bills met unpaid	£50
2) Drugs bought.....	£40
3) Food money to sister.....	£60
4) House rents in advance	£45
5) Food money for the future.....	<u>£40</u>
	£235

She looked at the two totals and said in her heart, "When butchering a snake, it is the first cut segment that is used in measuring the others." Then she felt a tingling glow of satisfaction run through her mind. She congratulated herself for a job well done. So long as she was concerned, expenditure on Nsahbinla had cancelled out his brideprice.

Two days later, she called Nsahbinla's sister and the nurse and told them that she had been in Victoria for five weeks and would like to return to Atieg. As such, she would tell the doctor to discharge Nsahbinla from hospital. She said it would be cheaper and easier caring for him at home than in the hospital. She added that since he could control urination and could waddle about, it was better to expose him to realistic surroundings where he would learn to take care of himself.

"Madam, we shall face the problem of feeding and rents. We may even be unable to buy drugs. In fact he will collapse if he hears that you are going."

"I have already paid the rents for some months in advance, and here is food money. Furthermore, I am not going for good. I shall be coming time and again to see how he is fairing. I am obliged to go and smoke my parents' houses. Thatched houses must be constantly smoked else they get bad. And if they get bad where will Nsahbinla put me? Anyway, he is used to throwing me out."

In the evening, Ntube took courage and told Nsahbinla that it was imperative for her to return to the village to smoke her parents' thatched houses. She also gave other

reasons why she had to return. Nsahbinla gasped as Ntube's words tended to stab him. He seized her hand and whispered, "Before you go, say you have forgiven me."

"Why should I say I have forgiven you? Did you offend me?"

"Yes, I did."

"I can't say I have forgiven you because I can't remember when you offended me."

"Mary please, please. Say you have forgiven me."

"I can't. I can't because if I do, I'll be taking an oath on you. If I knew you had offended me, I would not have been here."

"Please Mary. Please Mary, forgive me. Say you have forgiven me. If you don't, I shall not let you go."

"Caius Nsahbinla, you are splitting nobby wood. I would prefer you to thank me, than ask me to forgive you."

"Thank you Mary. But say you have forgiven me. "

"OK, Not now but when I next come. When I next come we shall have a lot to discuss. At that time you will be strong enough to ask for more than mere forgiveness. Allow me go and see Father Joe before it is late."

Chapter Thirty Six

Ntube then left for the Mission. When she saw Father Joe, tears welled up in her eyes, She embraced him with sobs of appreciation. She thanked him for his kindness to her, and told him she wanted to return to the village the next day. Father Joe cuddled her and advised her to take courage. He then blessed her after a short prayer and handed her the fifty pounds.

The next day Ntube left for Atieg. She made a brief stop at Kumba to see Mr. Ndzerem and recount to him Mr. Nsahbinl's situation in Victoria. Mr. Ndzerem listened very attentively and praised her for the concern and love she had shown on her former husband. He tried to cox her to pass the night in Kumba but she insisted on going. When she was going, she handed the paper on which she had calculated the expenditure on Mr. Nsahbinla to him.

When she left, Mr. and Mrs. Ndzerem studied the document together.

"Where did she take all that money," Mrs. Ndzerem asked.

"I can't tell. £235? Wonderful!"

"That girl really loves Nsahbinla," Mrs. Ndzerem commented.

"You are right. I believe if we woo her back she will accept to return to Nsahbinla."

"I think so. It is not even the money aspect that is outstanding – it is the care. For five weeks she took care of a man who had disgraced her by tricking her out of marriage. Wonderful!"

"I think the best thing we shall do is to go to Victoria and tell Nsahbinla to reciprocate Mary's goodwill by sending a delegation to Atieg to plead with her to return to him."

"You are right. That is the best thing to do and it must be done immediately," Mr. Ndzerem said and promised to go to Victoria the next day.

Immediately Ntube reached home, news got to Ahone and she rushed to Atieg to welcome The Daughter-of-the-upstream-Python and to suggest that she should hasten the carrying out of the purification ritual.

"The chiefs and traditional doctors are getting impatient. Some people think you have bluffed the clan by overstaying in Victoria," Ahone told her.

"What do they mean by overstay? They think Victoia is Atieg? What did they want me to do?"

"They had thought that you would be in Victoruia for a day or two. But when your stay extended into weeks, they started agitating. Some even said you had reconciled with your husband. And of course, all they said came to me."

"Because they think I'm a dry plantain leaf that can be blown about by the wind. They are joking. Now that I have returned what are they saying?"

"They are waiting for you. Let's have this thing over by next Ngonboku market day."

"Then tell them to get ready. I am ready. Those who think it is urgent to carry out the purification should get ready to assist."

"There is no gainsay. The chiefs had promised to assist. So my only worry now is the length of time it has taken. Their goodwill might have been compromised."

"You think there is goodwill?"

"A lot. Your people love you."

"Then tell them. Fix a date."

Ahone went at once to tell the chief and they made a date. Three days before the date, the chief organized a preparatory meeting in Ntube's compound.

"If we had carried out this thing on time we would not have been bothering ourselves now with extra-expenditure. But Ntube has made it drag and drag and now most of the

people are angry. Some even say they will not attend. Everybody is pieced up," The chief remarked angrily.

"*Amue*, my father used to tell me that if one wants to avoid being smeared with mud he should not attempt catching a pig wallowing in mud. The children of nowadays are like pigs wallowing in mud," *Sango* Etame tried to playdown the matter.

"You are watering down the matter. Ntube has to tell us why she kept so long in Victoria. Children like Ntube should not be allowed to set examples other children would copy," *Sango* Elondo threatened in anger.

"I think we are rushing into a situation we do not know. Ntube might have fallen sick. The people of Nso might have refused taking the brideprice. So, let us not be confrontational," *Nhon* Ngoe cut in.

"I would suggest that we ask Ntube nothing now. Let us wait till the whole clan is there. Let us only tell her that she should be ready to appease the people," Ejolle suggested.

The people accepted Ejolle's suggestion and went on to draw up lists of prominent traditional doctors, chiefs and dance groups they would invite. Finally they assigned the clearing of sections of roads to different familyheads. After the discussions, Ntube gave the people light entertainment.

Chapter Thirty Seven

On the purification day, Ahone woke Ntube up early and they got ready for the occasion. The Atieg women also got up early to assist Ntube in the cleansing ritual. Very soon, people from other villages started arriving and were led to their respective sitting places in the grove. The traditional doctors were led into a hut where they were to discuss the modalities of carrying out the purification.

They asked for the cleansing items. Ntube brought them in a basket. They poured out the contents of the basket and started examining the items. They saw all the items but to their surprise, there was a bundle that looked like a bundle of money. It was reminiscent of what they thought they had seen before but they could not remember where and when. Their interest soon shifted from the bundle to *Sango Nyamempango* who had not yet arrived. He was to be the chief celebrant and nothing could be done without him.

As the morning wore on, people started agitating. Some blamed Nyamempango for always being late in occasions. Others said he was so aggrieved by Ntube's intransigence that he decided not to attend the occasion. Finally the traditional doctors sent somebody to Ngomboku for him. On his return he told the assembly that *Sango Nyamempango* had travelled and would only return the next day.

"You see! You see where all has come to? How long can we stomach Ntube's buffoonery? If she did not go for a pleasure trip to Victoria would we have been in this mess?" Sango Ekinde asked angrily.

"If *Mue* Nyamempango will not come, we better call off the occasion," *Sango* Elime said in anger.

"Let's call Ntube and scold her. We should tell her she is playing with her life," somebody intejected.

Before the man finished, doctor Nsunlid hopped into the middle of the assembly with the basket of ritual things. "Patriarchs and matriarchs of this clan, my colleagues have sent me to show you this basket so that we can discover its contents together. Here it is. We, the traditional doctors have seen its contents and they don't please us. One of you should come and unveil its contents so the rest of you can see."

Nzegge jumped forth, and on throwing the contents on the ground exclaimed, "Patrons and matrons of this land, this proud heritage of our foreparents, I am sorry to announce to you that Ntube did not even go to Victoria. Here is the bundle of money we gave her to return to Nsahbinla. Here it is, tied in the very piece of cloth we all know. Sages of this land, you would remember that I told you when we met at chief Nzume's place that if we were not careful, we shall turn Ntube's misfortune into a potion and we shall make the whole clan drink of it. Have my words come true or not? Are we now about to drink of it or not? Before then, I had told you that if a child is born with teeth and is allowed to live, she would not only be a witch, but also a cannibal when she grew up. Are my words true or not? Great patriarchs and matriarchs of this time honoured land, has a little girl not stripped you naked in the open market? Let the sages who countered my talk at chief Nzume's place, those in whose valleys the broken gourds of our wives and children would be found, be ashamed of their words. Let them come forth and challenge what I had said. Let them tell us whether Ntube sought their advice before venturing into this dare-the-devil fit."

Nzegge's words japped Ejolle from his seat. Everybody who was at chief Nzume's place knew that Nzege was avenging himself on Ejolle. Ejolle had demolished him at

chief Nzume's place and now he had the opportunity to fight back. Ejolle tried to stand up and challenge Nzegge. Chief Enongene saw the tension. He gesticulated at Ejolle. He understood and sat down.

"We need not get at each other's throat. We should not mix excrement and urine like women. Let's call Ntube and ask her what she knows about the mission we asked her to execute. If her explanation is not good enough, then we shall take action. If a little snake is big enough to cross the road, then it is big enough for its head to be cut," chief Enongene said.

Chief Nzume then asked the village crier to call Ntube and invite the doctors to the open court.

Chapter Thirty Eight

Ahone led Ntube by the hand into the open court and left her there to face the wrath of her people. Immediately she left her a faint rainbowlike radiance engulfed Ntube and filled the attendants who saw it with awe. They blushed and gasped, and whispered to each other about a mysterious sign. Those who could not see it said those who said they saw it were under the spell of hallucination. The traditional doctors claimed responsibility. They called it the preliminary warning.

When the rediance dissipated and the talk about it ended, Chief Nzume stepped forth and addressed Ntube.

“A Ntube, our people say, a boulder that is intermitently washed soon develops moss. You are fast becoming like that. What happened that you did not carry out the mission we assigned to you? We all want to hear what happened.”

“*A Sango* Nzum’,” Nzegge cut in. “Let me embellish your words. Our people say, if you have a boil on your head you don’t make your hand luggage heavy. I believe we see Ntube’s boil on her head but she does not feel it. But let me warn her. A bad child is like stale spittle. It is never kept too long in the mouth.”

“*A Mue* Nzegge’,” Chief Enongene addressed Nzegge. “We should not express ourselves in anger. Let us avoid anger. Let Ntube tell us what actually happened.”

Ntube breathed in stetorously for a moment. Her temperature rose surdenly. She drew her nose, tried to pull herself together and presently regained her stability. Then she cupped her hands and bowed to the sages of the land clockwise, starting with those who sat facing the south, west, north and east.

“Fathers and mothers of this land, dignitaries from all villages, our distinguished traditional doctors, with all due respect, in all humility, I have the honour to welcome you here today, to thank you for all you have been to me. I lack words to express my gratitude for the wonderful sacrifices you have always made to salvage me from my numerous misadventures.

About five weeks ago, you demonstrated your magnanimity by offering me all the ritual items my mother and I could not acquire for my purification. As if that wasn't enough sacrifice, you also offered me Nsahbinla's brideprice and asked me to go and return it to him in Victoria. That was marvellous. Today again, you have abandoned you individual and collective chores to attend to me. Once more, I say, I can't express my appreciation in words.

Before I continue, I have to apologize that if I have in one way or another offended any of you knowingly or unknowingly, I beg for pardon. *Nye* Mbole once said that insults should not make one burst her squint eye. I believe she was right. A squint eye is better than a blind one. Even stale spittle is better than a dry mouth and should not be spat out in all totality. But any person who thinks his spittle is so stale and discomfoting can sore his mouth by washing it with water boiling hot.

To go back to the point, I hear some of you say I did not go to Victoria. I did go to Victoria. Some of you say, I did not refund Nsahbinla's brideprice. I did refund his brideprice. Some of you say I stayed too long in Victoria. I would say I did not stay too long in Victoria. Some of you say when I returned from Victoriua, I sat on my laurels and spited you till my aunt came to remind me of the ritual imperatives. I would say, I did not do any such thing.

Now, you pillars of wisdom, great partriarchs and matriarchs of this land, I appeal to you to share in my experiences on my way to Victoria. I pray you to listen attentively so that by the end of the story, we can draw inferences.

On the day I left here, I boarded a lorry bound for Kumba at Nkinchong. We got to Upper Mongo ferry crossing late in the afternoon. Because the ferry was not in good working condition, we were advised to offload the vehicle before ferring it across the river. When we offloaded it, the ferry carried the vehicle across the river. The ferry then went back to carry the loads. Unfortunately instead of waiting for the load at the landing, the lorry drove straight uphill to wait for the passengers and the loads. That meant that, those who had heavy loads had to carry them to where the lorry was waiting.

Two fat women who were travelling with a young man, probably not their relative, lifted a large and very heavy load onto his head and watched him plod to the hilltop while they themselves waddled majestically behind. When the young man reached the hilltop, there was no person willing to help him put down the load. He stood waiting for the women. At a certain point, his body became crusty under the weight of the load and he started ricketing like the wing of a cricket. Then I saw his legs buckle and he collapsed under the weight of the load. The bag fell heavily on the ground and burst scattering its contents irretrievably in mud. When the women came and saw what had happened they cursed, scolded and blamed the young man for being evil, weak and intransigent.

Their insults and curses worked on our nerves and in unison we defended the young man and tried to resuscitate him. We left the Upper Mongo River Crossing late in the evening and reached Kumba at night. I passed the night in Kumba. The next morning I left for Victoria and went straight to see Nsahbinla.

Unfortunately I met him in a very bad state and because I thought I still had the human touch, I could not engage him in a divorce procedure. I wonder whether any of you here would have done so. It needed a lot of intrigues and

courage to handle the situation. I manoevered and gave Nsahbinla directly or indirectly the totality of his brideprice. But great pinnacles of this land, you would remember that you gave me only £200 to refund to him. You forgot that in giving the brideprice, he gave you a cow worth £5, a sitting allowance of £5, my mother £25, and my aunt £10. This amounted to £45 which needed to be refunded also. I therefore took upon myself to refund the amounts and return to Atieg with pride. I thought it wouldn't be proper for me to refund Nsahbinla's brideprice and come back to ask you to refund what you had forgotten. That nuance would not have befitted you, you, great pinnacles of my fatherland.

Paying back was not easy. Victoria is not Atieg. In Victoria, things are done in strait-jackets. So, I couldn't, because I had an emergency at home impose my standards. When I was the wife of Nsahbinla in Victoria, I saved money with two women group meetings – the Bakossi women's group and the Nso women's group. I had to terminate my membership of the groups in order to withdraw the money and pay Nsahbinla. The procedure was not easy. The two meetings hold at the end of each month. So, I had to wait for the end of the month. Records had to be checked thoroughly and accounts settled before I could do anything. When that was done, I withdrew my money and paid Nsahbinla on your behalf.

Your comments, or your anger against my long stay in Victoria tantamounts to saying that you expected Nsahbinla to lose the amounts you did not take into consideration when you gave me his brideprice or that he had to come here for it. I think neither of these two options would have befitted the honour I thought you deserved and deserve. Today, I am proud to say that we (you and I) have broken Nsahbinla's chains that fettered not only me but you also. We have refunded his brideprice. We are free.

But I can't say I am free from him when Ewang-Ename sticks on me like a tick. I hear he said he spent £200 on me. The money you see there is his. That is how he tied it. It is in tact. Nobody has tampered with the bundle. *A Sen Nzum'* take it and return it to him. Take it, here it is. I give it back to you as you gave it to me and I shall be happy if you refund it to him in the presence of all of you here."

Chief Nzume got the money and gave it to Ewang-Ename.

"Thank you very much, Now, I have only one hump to discard with. But before I do that, great icons of our land, custodians of our traditions, I want us to put our heads together and juxtapose the Mungo River ferry crossing incident and my misadventure in Victoria. Do you see any similarities between the two fat women and you, you people of my clan? Do you know that in giving me Nsahbinla's brideprice to go and refund it to him in a strange land, you were lifting a heavy load and putting it on my head? Do you now see that my long stay in Victoria is tantamount to my collapsing under its weight?

Pillars of wisdom, may I know the traditional criteria you used in giving brideprice to a divorced woman to go and return it to her former husband? Which traditional gauges did my mother use in cursing me? Which traditional yardstick did your great grandparents use in tabooing children from falling in a muddy and slippery area where they fetched water by the minute? What traditional touchstones did the founders of this clan use to build a sacred grove in the middle of a road? And if I should leave you and turn to the Nso people, can they tell me the traditional criteria they used in having Nsahbinla dismissed from his job?

Most respectful patriarchs and matriarchs of our traditions, I see in each case of a traditional taboo, whether here or elsewhere in the world, a baited trap set for widows and orphans. Traditions that mean well for their people

should protect them. Your traditions have destroyed Nsahbinla and me. And who on earth can be partisan to what destroys them?

Great custodians of our time-honoured traditions, you made me carry a load too heavy for me. You made me brave the roaring lion. I caught it and tamed it. You made me carry a boiling pot with bare hands from the blazing fire. I have placed it safely on the ground. You made me challenge the deities of Kupe-Muanenguba. And worse still you made me challenge the Kibalankoh – a strange deity from Nso.

And after all this, do you think, most honoured and most caring well-wishing patrons and matrons of our land, that I can ever, ever receive the ritual items you have given for my purification with any degree of appreciation? If my sufferings are as a result of my not having been cleansed, then what is the purpose of cleansing me now? What can the cleansing do now? Can it resurrect my mother? Can it rub out these scars of operations I am carrying? My most loving and concerned fathers and mothers, custodians of our traditions, epitoms of wisdom, I think you have burst the squint eye. I think you prefer the blind one. Else, why could you not take concerted action at the right time? What pleasure is there in mending broken calabashes? I think you missed the right time, the time you heard that my life was in danger. With all due respects therefore, I shall be very grateful if each and every one of you takes back his or her ritual item. Even if *Sango* Nyamempango were here, I would not have accepted the purification. It is too late,

It is too late because I have already defanged the roaring lion, I have skinned the dotted leopard, I have caged the constricting python, I have skinned the furious crocodile, I have planted my feet on the elephant tusk, I have climbed the iroko tree, I have unmasked the maskerade, I have caught Muankum by the tail, I have crossed the flooded river. And now, I dance ahon with two black *elobs*., one on either hand, *O sung o ngweh, o ngwehngweh!* Ntube concluded, bowed to the assembly and moved away.

The Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python's defence embellished with what looked like self-praise recitation anesthetized the sages of the land. Self-praise recitation was the prerogative of male sages. What was Ntube out for? As the sages of the land pondered over this, they did not take note that The Daughter-of-the-Upstream-Python had moved out of the grove. And in moving out she had drawn quite a good following from young girls and middle aged women who hailed and sang her praises. Gradually, the sages of the land started recovering from their reverie. They gazed at each other in dumb consternation. To their shock, they discovered that most of the young girls and middle aged women had gone with Ntube.

Chief Nzume looked around and saw Ahone. "*A mue* Ahon', can you go and tell Ntube and the women to come back? What has brought us here has not been concluded."

"*Nyango* Ahone will delay. Send somebody else – a young woman who can run," *Sango* Mbelle advised.

"Nsume go, run quick, quick," Chief Nzume ordered.

Nsume soon returned to tell the people that Ntube had parked her things and was being escorted by dancing and cheering women to an unknown destination.

"It will be nowhere else but the Mission. I think she is going to her godmother," Ahone said.

"Chiefs, traditional doctors and all of us here, if Ntube goes anywhere, we should send for her. It is imperative for her to be here. Though she has refused the cleansing, it is imperative that the ritual things that have been brought to the open be venerated with a ritual manifestation that would lead to their disposal. That can't be done in her absence," Chief Esambepie from Ngomboku advised.

Etane and Nange were then sent to pursue Ntube and the women and bring them back. But for two hours they did not return. Then two other women were sent. They too did not return. When a third pair was about to be sent, chief

Epinkwele of Muambong stood up and said, "*Abaanyang*, (my friends) our people say, an aubergine in which one would eat a maggot is never broken open. When I was invited to this matter I did not find out what it was all about. I simply took my walking stick and bag and came. And now see where it has led us to! A little girl, a girl with a running nose has unmasked us. I feel derobed. And in my shame, I beg to take leave of you."

Immediately chief Epinkwele left, chief Esambepie stood up and left. Then chief Bwese and chief Ngolle followed. The assembly watched in disbelief as one after another prominent invitee left the grove. Presently even the Atieg and Ekenzu people started leaving. When the traditional doctors saw what was happening, they whispered their misgivings to each other, got the basket of ritual items, put it in what they considered a safe place under a tree and also left.

The Lady with the Sting is sequel to *The Lady with a Beard*. In the two novels Alobwed'Epie compares and contrasts the masculinity and femininity of the two heroines Emade, and her daughter Ntube. In the first novel, Emade shuns her sex and clinks to a false masculine mask. In spite of her achievements she fails to debunk the old system. In *The Lady with the Sting*, her daughter Ntube, a less charismatic heroine, allows nature take its course and in the end she seizes the opportunity the erring old system gives her and destroys it.

Alobwed'Epie, author of *The Death Certificate*, *The Lady with a Beard*, *The Day God Blinked*, and *The Bad Samaritan* was born at Ngomboku in Kupe-Muanenguba Division, South-West Region, Cameroon. He studied at the Universities of Yaoundé and Leeds, and teaches Creative Writing at the University of Yaoundé 1, Cameroon.



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